

THE ORCHESTRA CONCERTMASTER AS A POLYFUNCTIONAL FIGURE

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Abstract

This artistic research examines the polyfunctional nature of the concertmaster's roles. Both broadly known and less discussed distinctive features of the concertmaster's role are addressed from the verbal and non-verbal communication perspective. In order to discover functional variety of this profession some illustrative cases from orchestral practice within an orchestra led by a conductor and in comparison with an orchestra without conductor were analysed. The presentation points to situations in orchestral practice and problem cases in music performance based on the author's long-lasting experience in the roles of an orchestral player, a concertmaster and a soloist (the author has been a member and one of the concertmasters of the Kremerata Baltica chamber orchestra since its founding in 1997 by the violinist Gidon Kremer). To summarize, a great diversity of musical roles alongside a variety of other duties falling on a concertmaster supports the multifunctional nature of this profession.

This paper is part of the project "Performer's Polyfunctionality in Musical, Cultural and Social Processes", funded by a grant (No. MIP-095/2013) from the Research Council of Lithuania.

Keywords: Music performance, orchestra, conductor, concertmaster, polyfunctionality.

1. Introduction

In the process of preparation for performing music and of actual performance the internal organisation and work of the orchestra are based on a complicated, many-sided and subtle communication between individual musicians in different instrument groups, between the various groups, between the soloist and the orchestra and between the orchestra and the conductor. Usually on the top of this hierarchy of relationships is the conductor and naturally the role of leader and manager is assigned to him. Increasingly frequent phenomenon of nowadays is a chamber orchestra playing without a conductor. Both in the case of playing with a conductor and in the case of playing without a conductor, the special role within complicated orchestral hierarchy falls on orchestra concertmaster. This presentation aims to reveal some distinctive features of this special role.

2. Who is a concertmaster

As is commonly agreed, a concertmaster must possess artistic competence and a developed violin playing technique on the one hand and the skills of a leader and organiser on the other. The first violin is highly

influential in the different spheres of orchestral life with many different musical and organisational tasks falling within their full or partial responsibility. As an orchestral player the concertmaster is in charge of technical preparation of the entire violin group and sometimes of all the strings and is expected to prepare parts including notation and fingering proposals. During group rehearsals and preparation for the first rehearsals with the conductor as well as performances without a conductor, he or she has to direct in the full role of a leader and an educator. The concertmaster is a leader from the orchestra's perspective, an orchestral player from the orchestra management's perspective and, as far as cooperating with the conductor is concerned, becomes an assistant, a mediator, a transmitter of musical ideas and a kind of translator of the conductor's gesticulation. The concertmaster is also expected to do the soloing because their parts often include solo sections that require a different kind of preparation, performance and technical means. In the case of playing with another soloist, the first violin takes the accompanying role. Because conductors change frequently, the nowadays concertmaster is expected to become a certain source of stability that embodies the face of the entire orchestra in the eyes of the listener.

These and other characterisations of the concertmaster are provided in relative detail in musical literature and are addressed at the debates of professional musicians.

There has been little research, however, on the different, even contradictory roles ascribed to a concertmaster in particular situations of music performance and orchestral life. The role of verbal and non-verbal communication that reveals and validates the distinctive features of the concertmaster's role is undiscovered issue in music literature as well. This is true for the concertmasters of the orchestra both with and without conductor.

3. Method and structure of analysis

This presentation examines the polyfunctional nature of the concertmaster's roles. Both broadly known and less discussed distinctive features of the concertmaster's role are addressed from the verbal and non-verbal communication perspective. In order to discover functional variety of this profession some illustrative cases from orchestral practice within an orchestra led by a conductor and in comparison with an orchestra without conductor were analysed.

The polyfunctionality of the concertmaster's position as well as the importance of the concertmaster's verbal and non-verbal communication competences is revealed through situations in orchestral practice. These include some specific problem cases that are becoming the object of discussion among the musicians involved in the music performance process.

The presentation points to situations in orchestral practice and problem cases in music performance based on the author's long-lasting experience in the roles of an orchestral player, a concertmaster and a soloist. This experience has served as basis for grouping the features that illustrate the polyfunctionality of the concertmaster, developing the questionnaire and analysing the feedback received.

The features illustrating the polyfunctionality of the concertmaster were grouped with focus on the fact that the concertmaster's profession covers the functions of a manager, an accompanist, a soloist, an educator and an orchestra representative, these going hand in hand with multifaceted listening/hearing (of both oneself and others), obedience to the conductor's direction and individual directing of the group/s, playing and, when doing so, making important decisions for the orchestra. This paper breaks down the concertmaster's roles into three groups: *concertmaster as a leader*, *concertmaster as a serving leader* and *concertmaster as a mediator*.

The presentation highlights some nuances in the music performance process and provides case studies that reveal the concertmaster's role and means to play that role: *synchronisation of musicians (own group or the entire orchestra)*; *music performance after the conductor's mistake*; *inspiring the orchestral*

players and communication of musical ideas.

The questionnaire was designed for conductors and concertmasters as well as orchestral players from different orchestras. Responses to the questions revealed the respondents' views upon the role and work of the concertmaster.

4. Revealing a concertmaster's role as a leader

When asked to name the roles of the concertmaster, both orchestral players and conductors who responded to the questionnaire pointed out the leader's role as a major one, indicating that the concertmaster is the leader of the first violin group, all string groups and the entire orchestra. The distinctive qualities required for the role of the concertmaster mentioned in the feedback characterise namely the role of the leader: self-confidence, the ability to control the situation, the ability to express one's opinion in a reasoned way and to protect and stick to it. Apart from these qualities, respondents pointed to the need for trust and respect. According to the musicians, it is only when he or she is a respected member of the orchestra community that the first violin is able to control different disputable situations and offer solutions that are trusted.

At the same time the scope and content of the leadership by the first violin is very much dependent on whether or not the orchestra plays with a conductor. Without a doubt, the leadership of the concertmaster is the most obvious when music is played without a conductor. The concertmaster then becomes the leading musician, takes over some of the conductor's functions and directs the rehearsal or even the concert. The conductor's tasks are then shared between the concertmaster, the other concertmasters or even all orchestra players.

Synchronisation in the process of music performing may serve as an example that proves this statement.

In order to ensure synchronisation when orchestra is performing without a conductor a lot time and preparatory efforts are required. In such a case ensemble coherence is quite a difficult task which necessitates a special organization within the orchestra, and additional internal agreements. The path leading to these agreements before the concert and during the music performance depends from the concertmaster to a large extent. Most of the times the tempo, phrasing, dynamics, overall emotional atmosphere of a work depends on the concertmaster. His or her responsibilities especially increase in unexpected, spontaneous musical idea turns, by which is rich stage performance. At the same time it must be stressed that when playing without a conductor, the responsibility for the synchronization aspects distributes among concertmasters of other groups, as it is not possible for the first violin to manage all groups performing different parties, to show all them their entrances or internal dynamic changes.

During music performance the available means for the concertmaster to communicate his or her thoughts to the orchestral players are unlimited: posture, arm, body and head movements, facial expression, eye contact and many other non-verbal means of communication. These include not only timely messages about tempo, dynamics and phrasing but also subconscious communications that encourage orchestral players to express a specific mood and character of the piece. Timeliness is one of the key requirements for such messages. Orchestral players must know when they are expected to begin the musical phrase and with what energy and when to end it, where the culmination and end of the piece will occur and of what character. To give the orchestra sufficient time to create musical images, the non-verbal communications transmitted by the concertmaster must always come ahead.

Although an outsider look at a conductor-directed orchestra may suggest that synchronisation of musicians depends exclusively on the conductor because he or she indicates entries, end of performance, rhythm and tempo, however, normally after a split second, and sometimes even simultaneously, the

concertmaster also carries out the indication and synchronisation function. Furthermore, the conductor is not always able to synchronise all groups and sometimes concentrates on one while the concertmaster is expected to take care of the groups outside the conductor's focus field and to synchronise performance with the leaders of other groups. This means that even in case of conductor-directed orchestral performance a certain part of responsibility for the *synchronisation of own group (or musicians sharing the same part), concertmasters of other groups or the entire orchestra* falls on the concertmaster.

Referring to the role of the concertmaster as a leader at preparatory stages preceding music performance, one should point out the ability to define and achieve the aims of the rehearsal, analyse the entire score in detail and identify the points that may be the most challenging for the individual groups. All of this is part of responsibilities of any orchestra concertmaster - both playing without a conductor and playing with him. This requires the highest level of musical professionalism.

In order to assemble an orchestral community focused on suggestive performance of music, a concertmaster cannot do without human relationship and positive communication with the orchestral players. As a matter of fact, this relation is too broad to fit into musical professionalism or into the competences of non-verbal communication. Each orchestral player is a personality with their own emotional attitude and chemistry as well as individual talent and abilities to reveal it. Hence to assemble an orchestra that satisfies not only musical audiences but also musicians' expectations, a concertmaster needs to have an excellent psychological and educational background and verbal communication competences. During rehearsals concertmasters are free to use verbal communication to provide explanations and arguments to the colleagues as regards what is expected of them.

The requirements for the verbal communication competences of a concertmaster are also supported by the feedback to the questionnaire. Many respondents stated that good playing is not enough for a concertmaster to achieve good results: more frequent and broader references are made not to the musical abilities of the concertmaster but rather to the specific personal qualities and the ability to socialise and communicate. Feedback obtained from musicians shows that great focus also rests on the concertmaster's communication style because not only what is being said but also how it is being said is important. Other frequently mentioned qualities include flexibility, diplomacy and even tranquillity and the ability to sense the situation and to understand when the expressed remark will help to achieve the desired result and when it will cause a conflict or simply worsen the overall climate. The reaction of conductors and other orchestral players to the concertmaster's remarks often depends namely on when and how they are being said.

A great challenge for the concertmaster's verbal communication competences relates to the qualities and actions of a specific conductor: clear or incomprehensible conducting and correct or unprofessional musical or technical proposals. The conductor's lack of experience and incompetence as regards the specificities of a certain instrument may cause resistance from orchestral players when it comes to putting his or her musical decisions into practice. In such situations it is namely the concertmaster who decides if and when the problem should be voiced or a better alternative should be proposed along with when and how it should be presented.

Orchestral players often have questions and all kinds of proposals some of which can be unacceptable and expressed at a wrong time. Feedback from the questionnaire shows that on the one hand it is preferable that the concertmaster listens to the proposals and on the other that he or she should not listen to everyone who speaks out. It is therefore very important in what way the concertmaster controls these situations verbally and whether he or she demonstrates sufficient patience and tolerance and at the same time is able to maintain a leader's position and to make the final decision without hesitation.

5. Illustrating a concertmaster's role as a serving leader

Despite the leader's function unanimously ascribed to the concertmaster, the direction of the orchestra by the first violin is conditional. More often than not he or she takes both a leading and a serving role contemporaneously. This role of a serving leader characterises the nature of the concertmaster's profession: the concertmaster is the leader of the orchestra which he or she is a member of.

In the musical hierarchy of an orchestra all orchestral players must submit to the will of the conductor. This also concerns the concertmaster, who is supposed to be one of *tutti*, hence to blend into common playing without standing out or, moreover, obtruding. And yet at the same time the first violin must be active and should direct and transmit the conductor's wishes. Submission to the conductor's will simultaneously combined with directing naturally raises additional requirements for the concertmaster's competences.

The content of the issue of serving leadership is the most obvious in situations where the conductor *makes a mistake*, indicates a wrong entry or stops the music in a wrong place or when during a performance with a soloist the conductor understands him or her in a wrong way. The concertmaster then has a split second to decide whether to submit to the conductor's will or to take over the initiative.

An analysis of the respondents' feedback shows that there is no unanimous opinion on how a concertmaster should act in such situations. Everyone pointed out that despite the relevance and frequency of the issue, there cannot be one answer because all depends on the circumstances: the type of conductor one is dealing with, the piece being performed, etc. However, whatever the circumstances are, the concertmaster has to decide what to do in a split second: whether after the conductor's mistake to take over the initiative with confidence that the orchestra or group will follow him or her or yet to stick to the conductor's hand. The same kind of decision is required when playing with a soloist: whether after separating from the soloist to play according to the music and follow the latter or yet to stay with the conductor. This instantaneous decision can either save or, on the contrary, worsen the situation still more.

It is namely in these situations that the importance of the concertmaster's non-verbal communication comes to the fore. In non-problematic situations the concertmaster's non-verbal communication arsenal involves hands and other body parts (head, face) as well as glance and posture. In problematic situations, however, this arsenal of non-verbal communication must be reinforced with additional signs and signals, which must be very clear, unambiguous and meaningful to show the concertmaster's position in a clear and confident way so that other musicians believe them. At the same time, these additional signs cannot be theatrical but should be subtle and unnoticeable to the listening audience. This is the sphere of the concertmaster's non-verbal communication competences which constitutes a very individual self-development area for a concertmaster.

High and specific professional standards for a concertmaster stem from the need to play the role of a soloist. Orchestral repertoires often include solo sections for the concertmaster which also demand combining the leader's and the servant's functions and instantaneous shifting between the two.

Orchestral solo sections require the concertmaster to use other means related to producing sound and timbre colour on the one hand and body language and playing intensity on the other. The duration of orchestral solo sections is relatively short and there is no time to prepare for them. The concertmaster is playing *tutti* at one moment and remains alone at the next. He or she is supposed to shift from common playing in a group to solo sound instantaneously whereas soloists normally have time to focus and concentrate before the performance and their playing lasts for quite a long time, which means they can get the feel and adjust the playing even during actual performance. In contrast, the concertmaster often has to finish an orchestral solo part very quickly to re-blend into the common *tutti* playing.

When performing solo sections, the concertmaster also faces another objective which involves a

contraposition between the leadership and serving functions. People who act in a concertmaster's position, as a rule, are outstanding personalities with a broad musical outlook and own opinion and ideas. Whereas the concertmaster's solo sections constitute the integral part of the piece and have to weave into the overall flow of music, not to stand out when it comes to style and blend into the overall interpretation of the piece dictated by the conductor but not by the concertmaster. The conductor's taste and stylistics may mismatch or even contradict the understanding of the concertmaster. The concertmaster must feel interpretational differences and seek to preserve the integrity of the piece, so he or she will attempt to obey the conductor's will. The ability to play a solo section in a suggestive and distinct way by offering a different interpretation than the concertmaster would prefer is one of the more challenging tasks that requires the ability to combine the roles of a leader/soloist and of a serving and obedient musician at the same time.

6. Illustrating a concertmaster's role as a mediator

The role of the concertmaster as a mediator in music performance first of all correlates with the interpretation of the piece being performed. The function of the directing interpreter of music definitely falls on the conductor. He or she must have a clear and complete sound picture of the piece of music. The conductor must be able to transfer his or her perceived interpretation to the orchestra to be sure that the performers have the same understanding of the conductor's idea and can communicate it according to the conductor's conception. Hence the conductor's interpretation is intermediary between that of the composer and the performer, i.e. the orchestra, and his or her main function is to interpret the piece of music for the performers.

The first violin becomes a kind of mediator in this pyramid of interpretational relations. He or she mediates between the conductor and the orchestra and is a kind of medium who transmits the conductor's individual creative will to the orchestra.

The mediating task of the concertmaster largely depends on the conductor's personality, forms of suggestion that they follow while transferring their temperament, musical taste, the sense of style and the idea of interpretation to the orchestra. Some conductors express suggestion in categorical bossiness while others demonstrate the qualities of a subtle diplomat. At rehearsals some conductors communicate their perceived musical ideas to the orchestra exclusively through a manual technique while others tend to discuss the author of performed music, the time in history, the style of the pieces and other interpretation-related issues with the orchestra. Thus in the first instance the concertmaster is a certain translator of the conductor's gesticulation who translates through non-verbal communication and in the second, an interested discussor who feeds back his or her own and the orchestra's collective sensation to the conductor. Such variety of tasks mostly falls on the concertmasters whose orchestras work a lot with invited conductors.

Whereas in case of performing music without the conductor opportunities for creative initiatives and responsibilities are distributed in a different way than performing music with the conductor. First of all, the orchestra without the conductor is a team, where each musician has more opportunities for creative initiative. Performing music without the conductor the solutions regarding the performance peculiarities and refinement fall on each musician of the orchestra. Thus performance without the conductor is basically performance of music based on the principles of a chamber ensemble.

The interpretation of a piece of music in an orchestra performing music according to the principles of a chamber ensemble is, as a rule, more or less the object of collective discussion, where both the view of the orchestra concertmaster and that of the concertmaster of instrumental groups is important. On the other hand, the number of the members of an orchestra is too big – much bigger than in chamber ensembles, thus it is impossible to take into consideration and implement each and every musician's interpretation ideas.

Therefore an orchestra needs a person to be able not only to listen to the propositions of all members of the orchestra, but also to accept or reject them, make a final decisions regarding the rhythm, the nature of sound, the timbre, the expressiveness, the development of the musical idea. This role most frequently falls either on the artistic director of the orchestra or on the concertmaster or the artist performing both of these functions at the same time.

Thus the role of the concertmaster as the mediator between the conductor and the orchestra transforms into that of a leader who typically demonstrates more democratic (collegial) leadership style. He becomes the democratic leader of the orchestra with certain chamber music performance principles.

Due to the discussed differences of the roles of the music performance participants the preparation of the concertmaster for the first rehearsal of a concert without the conductor differs a lot from the preparation for the concert with the conductor. It is not enough to learn one's part or prepare parts with the linage or the tablature propositions. The preparation is of a deeper and more complex nature encompassing the creation of a clear future interpretation image and consideration of suggestion forms which will be the basis for the concertmaster to transfer his temperament, musical taste and sense of style.

Alongside with the mediating role from the point of view of music performance the concertmaster's mediation function is integral with their organisational and managerial activity. The concertmaster is the mediator between the orchestral players and the administrative management of the orchestra: he or she communicates administrative decisions and directions to the musicians and in relations with the management represents the interests of the orchestral players. This dual representation is rather complicated because the orchestral players expect support from the concertmaster, who is one of the musicians, in problematic situations. At the same time the concertmaster is in a managerial position as their employment contract provides participation in employing or dismissing members of the orchestra or deciding about their sitting layout. Therefore the concertmaster's organisational and managerial activities highlight the importance of constructive argumentation abilities.

7. Conclusions

- Based on the artistic experience and an analysis of feedback to the questionnaire three groups of the concertmaster's roles were distinguished: concertmaster as a leader, concertmaster as a servant and concertmaster as a mediator.
- The content of the role of the concertmaster is very much dependent on whether or not the orchestra plays with a conductor.
- In the case of the conductor-led orchestra the concertmaster mostly acts as an interface between the conductor and the orchestra, plays the role of a mediator, communicates the conductor's ideas through own sound and body language.
- The concertmaster takes over many leadership functions in the case where the orchestra has no conductor and democratic (collegial) style of leadership is dominating.
- A great diversity of musical roles alongside a variety of other duties falling on a concertmaster supports the multifunctional nature of this profession.
- An examination of every individual role of the concertmaster reveals the importance of the available means of verbal and non-verbal communication as well as highlights the requirements for verbal and non-verbal communication competences of the concertmaster.
- It may seem that musical excellence, sound, body and eye language, or, in other words, non-verbal communication competences are critical for the concertmaster. However, feedback from many

respondents broadly refers not to the musical abilities of the concertmaster but personal qualities and verbal communication competences. Hence in the concertmaster's activities the means of verbal and non-verbal communication are equally important and illustrate the polyfunctionality of the concertmaster's position.