

Guest Editorial: Positioning “conducting studies” in 2020 – where are we and where can we go?

This special edition positions “conducting studies” in 2020 as a dynamic, multifaceted and multi-disciplinary research field. Shifting the focus of “conducting studies” beyond the long-established paradigms of (auto)biography and standard technical manuals, it presents distinctive new scholarship drawn from the Oxford Conducting Institute’s (OCI) international conferences. The three OCI conferences to date have provided a melting pot for discussions between practising conductors, those engaged in practice as research, theorists, and musicologists. The range of topics and methodologies captured in the conference programmes (2016, 2018, 2019)¹ provides a valuable representation of the ways in which research is developing. The diverse range of methodologies generated across themes and topics signals the potential for dialogue and strengthened links between practice and research: practitioner-researchers are featuring more strongly than ever before. Interdisciplinary tools and approaches are informing and shaping new understandings of an array of issues, including: gender; performance psychology; technologically informed and measured research on gesture, tempi, dynamics, articulation and diction; performance traditions; acoustics; audience response and so on. This special edition therefore shows that conducting studies in 2020 is both building on – and breaking away from – the structures that have determined its preoccupations and characteristics.

Fascination with conductors – what they do, and how and why they do it – has occupied writers since the “baton” conductor took centre stage in the mid-nineteenth century.

¹ Oxford Conducting Institute Conducting Studies Conference, 24-26 June 2016, St Anne’s College, University of Oxford: https://www.music.ox.ac.uk/assets/OCIConductingStudiesConference_Programme_Final_2016-06-21-r.pdf; Oxford Conducting Institute International Conducting Studies Conference, 21-23 June 2018, St Anne’s College, University of Oxford: https://www.music.ox.ac.uk/assets/OCIICSC_CONFERENCE-BOOKLET_COMPLETE_2018-06-15_s.pdf; International Conducting Studies Conference 2019 presented by the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and Oxford Conducting Institute, 2-4 August 2019, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Australia: <https://sydney.edu.au/content/dam/corporate/documents/sydney-conservatorium-of-music/research/ICSC%202019%20final%20schedule.pdf>.

Alongside academics and other authors, conductors themselves have contributed to the substantial corpus of texts on the topic through interviews, memoirs, tutorial texts and treatises. However, other than historical accounts of conductors' lives and work, it was only in the latter part of the twentieth century that there was a move within scholarship to systematically investigate conducting and its associated practices. Within musicology, this is not particularly surprising as it has followed the relatively recent and broader turns toward socio-cultural and performance-centred research paradigms (e.g., Cook, 2015). Despite the prestigious positioning of large ensembles within western classical music, the demystification of "the art of conducting" has been slow – perhaps due in large measure to the mythologised status of conductors and the elusive nature of their craft.

An examination of an online bibliographic reference tool (Holden, 2016) reveals the dominant approach to defining the field of conducting studies to date. In the article on "Conductors and Conducting" in the *Oxford Bibliographies Online (OBO)* resource (last modified in October 2016), five main headings are adopted under which significant contributions to research in this area are arranged and evaluated. Describing the literature on conducting as "something of a maze", Holden adopts the following categories: "Conducting Technique and Performance Style"; "Autobiographies, Memoirs, and Letters"; "Biographies and Group Biographies"; "Orchestras and Opera Houses"; "Discographies and Chronicles". These categories emphasize treatises and manuals concerned with interpretation and technique together with the agency of individual conductors and institutions within a literature shaped by exponents themselves and written by expert and amateur authors. There are a few omissions, such as *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting* (Bowen, 2003) – a valuable and logically organised point of reference including contributions by conductors, players, managers and musicologists – and Galkin's ground-breaking study (1988) of the theory and practice of conducting. The tool is designed to provide what OBO describes as a "roadmap". An expanded version of this bibliography could include historical work on conductors, institutions, pedagogical schools, society, nationality and politics, which reveals new insights (Patmore, 2001; Spitzer, 2008; Mathieson, 2010; Dymont, 2012; Dibble, 2013; Rudel & Paller, 2013; Illiano & Niccolai, 2014; and, postdating the last update of the tool: Palmer, 2017; Allen, 2018; Holman, 2020). It could also extend to recent examinations of performance traditions including interpretative approaches (Hurwitz, 2012; Kolkowski, Miller & Blier-Carruthers, 2015; Dymont, 2016), of pedagogy and practice (Baltuch, 2014) and of practical approaches to conducting (Roxburgh, 2014; Thakar, 2016), which have further expanded the field.

Although the bibliography provides a clear "roadmap" we are arguing here that work in the field of conducting studies is moving in new directions that signal the need for a reconceptualization of conducting studies. That reconceptualization takes the variety of disciplinary perspectives already engaged in research into conductors and conducting into account. For example, empirical research into conductor leadership and authority has been ongoing within sociology and social psychology since the early '70s (e.g., Faulkner, 1973; Atik, 1994; Boerner, Krause & Gebert, 2004) and technological advances in video analysis and motion capture have opened up new horizons for research into conducting gestures in music psychology. There is now a great deal of work that is being done in this area, including investigations into beat induction from conducting gestures (Luck 2011), the impact of a conductor's gesture and posture on musicians' muscle tension and vocal quality

(Manternach, 2016), causal leader-follower relationships between conductors and musicians (D'Ausilio et al., 2012),² and which parts of a conductor's body convey the most information about expressive intentions (Wöllner, 2008).

But naturally the study of conductors and conducting calls for investigations far beyond concerns with biography, discography, leadership and gesture. There is a great deal that is still under-examined regarding: aspects of the rehearsal process and ensemble management, from hiring, firing and fundraising to rehearsal communication and marking parts (including how they have been involved with shaping the demographics of orchestral labour); conductors' role in curating cultural values through repertoire choices and programming; their position (and activities) as teachers in educational contexts including the training of other conductors; and many other issues related to authority, power, and responsibility. Such future investigations (as well as reconciliation with past scholarship) require sustained engagement with issues of equality, diversity and inclusion across any number of intersections including ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexuality. Crucially, current (and historical) conducting studies research has failed to adequately address issues of racial inequality – and indeed racism – within the profession and the musical cultures in which conductors work.

As practising conductors will be well aware, all of the above crisscross with the wide variety of situations and conditions under which conducting takes place, and which hold varying degrees of prestige within the classical music firmament, be they: educational settings with young people, work with amateur musicians or professionals; in the pit for ballet, opera or musical theatre, or on the concert platform; with orchestras, choirs, wind and brass bands, or even smaller (typically contemporary) ensembles; and throughout countless regional and international contexts. Increasingly, scholars and research-practitioners are beginning to tackle these wide-ranging topics, but it can be difficult to bridge the gap between scholarship and practice.

The aim of the OCI initiative (instigated by the 2016 conference) is to refocus the spotlight within the research field to capture the constellation of conducting-related topics across disciplinary boundaries and between practitioners and researchers (where those distinctions are even necessary to make). This move is critical if we are to obtain a more comprehensive and ecologically-minded approach to understanding a practice which dominates western classical music narratives and educational structures. The “performative turn” in academia more broadly is particularly significant in music, where practice and research have long been kept at arms' length from one another. The evolving recognition of the dialogic nature of musicological research (and researchers) and its performative others, has softened boundaries and promoted collaboration. Increasing recognition of “practice as research” has brought new perspectives and avenues of enquiry to the study of conducting.

The articles that make up this special edition of *MPR* therefore highlight new research that engages with the pedagogy of conducting and with specific aspects of choral conducting and participation. Both Galbreath and Thatcher, and Kaufman and Flanders, consider the impact of changing their pedagogical strategies in pre-existing courses.

² For a detailed review of technology and large ensemble research see Ponchione-Bailey and Clarke (forthcoming).

Through a re-examination of their own teaching practices via the lens of scholarship that is not yet readily known in conducting pedagogy, they propose new pathways for teaching and inquiry. Both articles highlight that undergraduate conducting courses are often weighted towards physical gestures that embody musical understanding, but the authors address very different aspects therein.

Kaufman and Flanders investigate the impact that prioritising approaches to in-depth score study – as opposed to primarily focussing on gesture – can have on student learning outcomes. Drawing on a substantial body of research into conducting curricula in the United States over the last thirty years (from Zirkman, 1984 to Mitchell, 2018), including the roles of practical musicianship, orchestration and recordings in beginner conductor training, and the challenges of assessing process-driven learning, they provide a thought-provoking context for their study. Through innovations in course design and the analysis of student reflections, Kaufman and Flanders observe a strong connection between pedagogical malleability and student understanding, in particular drawing correlations between an integrated score study process and student perceptions of skillsets that are required in musical leadership (including gestural communication). Based on their analysis they offer two models as useful frameworks for future conducting courses, and illuminate some of the challenges facing beginner conducting courses today, notably wide-ranging student competencies in practical and theoretical musicianship, and limited podium time.

Galbreath and Thatcher explore the relationship between physical leadership and physical interaction with others, proposing that new approaches to gestural training might promote alternatives to “notions of authority by embracing the poietic influence of singers”, via relational physiovocality. Any conductor reading this will know that their gestures are as much about their preconceived musical intentions as they are about engaging with the musicians in the room (i.e., the sum of rehearsal experiences tailored to the musicians in the moment). In this article, Galbreath and Thatcher demonstrate that the complexity, immediacy, and inherent flexibility, of gestural communication, has been under-represented in conducting pedagogy. They also suggest that a primary focus has often been on agency and control (referring to core texts by Kaplan, 1985; Durrant, 2003; Manternach, 2011; Daley, 2013; and Garnett, 2009).

The ideas of Nattiez (1990), Cook (2001), and Foucault (1977) are used to polarise the conceptual premise about what a conductor’s gesture achieves. Through a consideration of the poietic and esthetic process between singers, conductors, and interpretive decisions, Galbreath and Thatcher centre in on Thomaidis’s (2014) notion of “physiovocality” (also employing Garnett, 2009, and McNeill, 2009, to support the idea of “greater mutuality”) and present four approaches to conductor training that enables a new perspective on the choral conductor’s role. Galbreath and Thatcher’s conclusions point to pedagogical strategies for nurturing students’ gestures and articulate the importance of understanding agency between performer and conductor when doing so.

A striking feature of this study, and of Bonshor’s “Collaborative learning and choral confidence: The role of peer interactions in building confident amateur choirs”, is that the experience and perception of participants feature at the centre of their research designs. In moving away from conductor-centred research paradigms, these studies reflect a common premise shared amongst many of the papers presented at past OCI conferences: that to understand the discipline of conducting, one must understand the dialogue and symbiosis

between performers and conductors, and between performers themselves, in a multi-directional way. A core objective of the conference is to encourage diversity within conducting studies scholarship including that which avoids a top down view of the profession and acknowledges the importance of the wide range of conducting practices (orchestral, opera, choral, ballet, symphonic wind, student, amateur, etc.), as well as the value of the context-specific knowledge of practitioners within this broader community.

Bonshor's article contributes to redressing the imbalance in research concerning confidence in group music activities, which has often focussed on students in higher education rather than amateur singers, pointing out that this demographic is the "largest cohort of participants involved in music-making in the West". This interview-based study explored the lived experience of amateur choral singers with a focus on identifying the factors which affect singers' confidence in their vocal skills and choral performance ability. Participants' responses emphasised the importance of collaboration, teamwork, peer-to-peer learning, and the role of informal "team leaders" in the increase in individual and group confidence levels. These findings underpin Bonshor's proposal that the amateur choral environment can be understood as a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and he offers specific suggestions on how choral conductors can maximise the benefits of the intrinsic nature of multi-directional learning in their own work whether in amateur or professional environments.

Hauck's article, "When are the initial consonants articulated in choral performance? Case studies of choral works sung in German", is part of a larger study on text diction in choral performances (Hauck, 2019). For choral singers and conductors alike, Hauck's research will add evidential support to either settle or enliven debates about the instant of articulation of consonants in choral performance. Noting the importance of the placement of initial consonants in decision-making process for conductors during the preparation of a performance, Hauck compares the theoretical statements of conductors in pedagogical texts and interviews with regard to the placement of initial consonants, with what conductors actually do in practice through a detailed audio analysis of selected recordings. Through the use of Sonic Visualiser, Hauck identifies whether the attacks of one or two initial consonants occur before, or with, the accompanying instrumental attack in fourteen different recordings of Bach's *Trotz dem alten Drachen*, BWV 227/5 and Schubert's *An die Sonne*, D439 spanning 1958-2011.

Hauck's findings do more than just explore the relationship between the trends evidenced in the recording analyses and the suppositions of her sources. Based on the audio analyses, Hauck proposes that there are additional aspects of consonants, such as their ability to be lengthened – which have more impact on their precise placement than other features, an element not discussed in conductors' theoretical statements. Her conclusions suggest that there is potential for wider application of this research, for practitioners, musicologists, and choral conducting pedagogy alike. She proposes that the impact of this research "may facilitate ensemble synchronicity, principally if one favours sonorous and clearly pronounced consonants".

Taken together the contributions to this special edition provide a window into the range of topics and the variety of interdisciplinary and methodological approaches involved in research in the field of conducting studies today. This is a fertile time for developments in conducting studies research. Technological innovations continue to open up possible routes

of enquiry; there is a broad shift in focus towards performance and the social impact of music with musicological discourse. The enduring omissions in the field with regard to issues of race and intersectionality remain; as part of a more sustained and critical response involving the review and revision of publication practices and conference curation, the June 2021 OCI International Conducting Studies Conference will foreground issues of race, and continue to prioritise scholarship that focusses on gender and other inequalities. Meanwhile, we hope that this special edition will stimulate further research and debate in the field of conducting studies and we encourage the presentation of responses and developments at the OCI's next conference.

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