

Music in the Dark. Conducting Without Seeing

Conducting an orchestra is not easy. It is even more difficult if you close your eyes, and you are not able to see the musicians.

Even more, if you have never seen the orchestra, or anything else.

When I was a piano student in Italy, I had a colleague, blind from birth. He was studying the same repertory as all of us: preludes and fugues from the Well-Tempered Clavier, and also difficult techniques. Everything learned by heart, note after note, from the Braille transcription so difficult to find, so difficult to analyze. Everything with hard work and a strong passion for the music. He often touched the hand of the teacher to catch their precise movements, and the hand of the nearest colleague for the emotional communication, denied him by his eyes.

Years later, I'm here in my room on an American university campus, and I would like to write some words about this old friend, now an accomplished orchestral conductor and concert pianist in Italy. He teaches music and keeps practicing and giving concerts. His name is Marco Orsini, class of 1985. One of the not famous people who, unbeknownst to the news, do extraordinary things despite of the challenges they face.

We met again this last summer, at the Conservatory of Palermo, where we originally studied. There, we talked about his approach to conducting amidst the sea on one side and inscriptions in honor of Alessandro Scarlatti and Vincenzo Bellini.

Marco came with a guide. Even a stroll may be difficult in a big city and alone.

“What made you decide to study conducting?” I asked. He said that conducting an orchestra completed his musicality and especially enriched his understanding of piano. To him, many pianists do not feel comfortable playing with an orchestra because they don't fully perceive the technique,

the tempo, the demands and the natural characteristics of orchestral instruments. In a piano and orchestra concerto, the piano is accompanied by an instrument made of a mass of people. “When I conduct,” he said, “I have to communicate enough energy to activate the mass of musicians, that should act as a single unit.”

I remember a master class of Aldo Ceccato. He was providing cues only with his eyes, as an exercise. In the case of Marco, there is no eye contact. He relies on precise listening and gestures. For Marco, listening helps to not only recreate the orchestral sound, but also to imagine the facial expressions, behaviors, movements, and gestures of musicians. “Cues are important, but the orchestra attacks anyway. What you really need is to be an interpreter, from Latin inter-pretium, the matchmaker, between the seller and the buyer. The seller is the score [the composer], the buyer is the listener. An orchestral piece has been written by a unique head for a mass of people, a mass of musicians and listeners.”

While we were talking, some young student was repeating over and over a simple passage, to memorize the movement and the sounds, and trying to correct the wrong notes. Talking about memory, Marco thought that sometimes we prefer a kinetic memory. For the orchestra, that doesn't work. We need a musical and global memorization of the score.

When we were studying piano, he used to look for and follow the hand of the teacher. Similarly, in conducting, our professor, Carmelo Caruso, used to take our arms and move them, to let us feel the correct movement, before reproducing by ourselves, and if necessary, personalizing them. Marco told me that in general, as a blind person, he prefers no intermediate steps: at first, he completely trusts the movements of the teacher, completely following them. And then, he is completely alone in the musical performance gestures.

Despite his accomplishments, he faced many difficulties. In general, old and more experienced orchestral performers are sometimes impatient with young and inexperienced students holding the baton for the first time. “What happened to you?” I asked. For Marco, the great difficulty was the personal approach to musicians. They think they can do everything with a blind conductor because “he is not able to see anything.” But when they start playing, his display of perfect pitch, perfect spatial localization, and greater knowledge of the music, it shows that they are wrong. On the other hand, some other orchestral performers are happy to experience a new way of working. Alex Lubet,

my composition professor here in the U.S. and a scholar of disability studies, thinks that possible discrimination is another obstacle added to that of impairment itself.

Are there any other blind conductors? Yes, there are Gabriel Francisco Bergogna and Luigi Mariani. Exceptional localization skills developed via heart-learning, complete mastering of the entire score and perfect gestural control, make orchestral conducting by a blind musician not only possible but convincing. All non-disabled people should learn from these examples that the artistic activity has extraordinary power to allow expression and communication among all living beings, overcoming their own difficulties.

In the midst of our interview we paused for a glass of cold water against the sultriness of middle summer, at this point Marco played some Chopin on the piano. He loves his music, and he also loves Bach's fugues. He's happy with being able to memorize fugues: "That's a way to disassemble pieces, to understand how they are made, learning a voice at a time."

Before playing, Marco moves his arms along the keyboard, as he was quickly "measuring" it, building a mind-image of the piano to construct gestures. When he plays, he quickly touches without pressing the keys to make more precise his inner "vision" of the piano. After his experience with Cutrera, Petrushansky and Sokolov, Marco found the school of Russian piano technique particularly helpful with the control of the keyboard in difficult musical passages such as large intervals and big distances, as well in staccato articulation. He says, "you never lose the contact with the keys." While Marco needs assistance to reach the piano on stage and in class, once he's there, no more obstacles.

Time to go home, each of us hoping that the traffic would not cost too much time. Hugs and farewells. Years ago, he asked me if I was blonde. This time, he asked me "Do you have a boyfriend?" Upon hearing no, he protested, saying, "are they all blind over there?" We both laughed. I hope to see him again soon, though I don't say it this way; he would answer me, "I never saw you. But I never stopped listening to you."

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