Cayenna Ponchione-Bailey

Expressing Values: Engaging Orchestras in Social and Environmental Work

From their institutional organization to the expression of values through concerts structure and programming, symphony orchestras, and the music they perform, have been appropriated across the globe to support political and social agendas (Willson 2009, Baker 2012, Ramnarine 2011).

Such initiatives include projects at ‘home’ such as Venezuela’s El Sistema, which aims to transform the lives of socially disadvantaged children through orchestral experience and training, to the Barenboim-Said East-West Divan Orchestra, which provides a space for young musicians from Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran to come together to create what Barenboim calls a ‘utopian republic’ (Willson, 2009:1), seeking to break down national boundaries and foster understanding. My own work has sought to bring attention to humanitarian and environmental issues through orchestral performances via programming and commissioning, while leveraging the concert event as a platform for educating communities.

From many perspectives these initiatives are excellent examples of how to leverage the orchestra’s cultural status and structure (large musical ensemble and public performance) to bring about social change. However, scholars such as Small (1987), Attali (1977), and Cook (2015) have argued that the social relationships enacted in the course of producing, rehearsing, and performing orchestral music can be seen to perform ideologies associated with authoritarianism, capitalism, and communism, including the view that the symphony orchestra performance is ‘an important ritual of the power-holding class’ (Small 1987:7), celebrating the values of industrial society.

Indeed, orchestras are complex entities embedded in both broader global historical-cultural contexts as well as the local contexts of the communities in which they reside. Their history and continued development is intricately entwined with the repertoire that they play, itself a confluence of cultural and ideological influences, and which over time accrues layer upon layer of meaning-making potential. Whether they are small-scale amateur or internationally recognised professional ensembles, orchestras require significant material and human resources, the sources of which are rarely apolitical. They are heterogeneous groups of individuals organised into an overtly hierarchical structure, the negotiation of which is mediated by a multitude of tacit and explicit understandings. Moreover, the actual musical material that they play and the rituals that surround their performances ‘script’ social actions, affording the construction of some social relations while repressing or discouraging others.

Perhaps most conspicuously, however, and one of the primary reasons that the orchestra has been criticised for encapsulating authoritarian values, is on account of the dictatorial power that it appears conductors are able to wield over their orchestras. The image of the omnipotent maestro is deeply embedded in the public imagination. For example, it was even recently used as a foil by a sports journalist from a major newspaper: ‘The misconception here is the belief that coaches are somehow akin to orchestral conductors. Standing in front of the team waving a baton while conducting every decision, action and associated nuance’ (The Times, Friday 2 October 2015). This perception, however, is not confined to the sports arena, and the myth of the omnipotent maestro seeps into the social practices of orchestral rehearsals and performances (Levine & Levine 1996).
While it is not clear that these perspectives hold true in all orchestral cultures, and research has illuminated that conductors’ power is far from absolute (Faulker 1973, Atik 1994, Dobson & Gaunt 2015), if orchestras are to be deployed in projects directed at social change, it is crucial that we understand what types of relationships are being brought into being through their particular musical processes. Drawing inspiration from Born’s concept of music’s ‘four planes of social mediation’ (Born 2011:266), this paper will probe the constellations of social relations in which orchestras are enmeshed in order to explore whether or not the inherent nature of orchestral practice is at odds with the more democratic and egalitarian values that underpin much of the work that the aforementioned projects propose to support.

Moving quickly from a bird’s eye view, I will drill down to the bedrock of the intimate microsocialities enacted by orchestral musicians in the actual process of playing orchestral music. In particular, I will draw on the findings of my four-year doctoral study of creativity and authorship in orchestral performance, which sought to map the accomplishment of expressive performance in orchestral practice in real-world settings. Utilising a new online data collection method (developed in collaboration with a team of computer scientists at Cornell University), I captured experiential data from dozens of the musicians in the same orchestra about very specific music-making episodes (2-3 minutes). This facilitated the triangulation of diverse experiences which usually remain tacit, and opened up a new window into the on-the-ground interactions which really take place while playing orchestral music. The study generated data from six orchestras across a range of skill levels, documented 42 different playing situations, and generated over 1500+ individual comments from participants.

The findings of my research underscore how action and influence within orchestras is multifaceted, contingent, and not predisposed to follow simple hierarchical channels, and how in reality, orchestral musicians are constantly negotiating competing influences such as accepted performance conventions, the musical context, and material influences like instrumental properties and acoustic spaces, as well as those of the institutional hierarchy (in addition to many others) in order to determine how and when to play from moment to moment.

From this perspective, I offer that orchestras have the potential to embody widely differing social relationships through their practices, and propose that in order to conscientiously deploy orchestras as a way of instigating social change, greater attention needs to be paid to the way in which these ensembles embody social values in their microsocial as well as macrosocial spheres. Such attention to the integrity of the proposed values throughout the orchestral assemblage offers new potential for truly successful engagement with a global society beyond the concert platform.

REFERENCES


