



## Orchestral Conducting as Educational Practice: A Smallian Perspective of Relationships and Pedagogy in Youth Orchestras

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### Abstract

In this article the author attempts a first description of his ongoing research on the pedagogy and educational philosophy which can be applied in working with the youth orchestra, based on Christopher Small's theory of musicking; the youth orchestra is seen here as a learning community, and the author attempts to redefine the relationships which are embodied and shaped within it, wishing to stir up the stagnant social relationships of the classical orchestra community. The article is particularly concerned with the power relationship between the teacher-conductor and the students, while raising questions of musical identity, hierarchy and empathy from a Smallian perspective applied to the conducting of the youth orchestra, within a concept of *educational conducting*.

**Keywords:** Christopher Small, music education, youth orchestra, conducting, musical identity, musical relationships, hierarchy, empathy, self-awareness

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### Introduction

The philosophy of *musicking* given by Christopher Small in his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (1998) is here proposed as one of the most important and innovative contributions to musical pedagogy. In order to assign a practical value to this contribution, it is important not to limit our consideration of this author's revolutionary thought to the field of philosophical investigation into the meaning of (doing) music, but to attempt to interpret it in a way that is useful to musical teaching in schools and in music academies. In the past two years, I have carried out an in-depth evaluation and analysis of the various aspects of my work as a conductor of youth orchestras, in the light of Small's thought, to

formulate the beginnings of a new educational approach to orchestral training. In this paper, I will first propose a reading of Small's thought, and then follow this with an explication of the specific notion, informed by a Smallian approach, of the conducting of the youth orchestra as an educational practice in itself, leading to the concept of *educational conducting*.

### The vision of the foreigner: A reading of the thought of Christopher Small

Travel has always played a fundamental role in human life. It is this that allows humankind to expand our consciousness of the world, or rather of the planet in which we live and of the creatures that inhabit it. But travel is also an experience we seek

in order to discover new horizons with which to obtain affirmation of our own existence: a chance for real and direct knowledge of life and of ourselves.

There is nothing more contrary to this experience than the modern mechanical and blind way of life in which we are so often caught, born into a society that takes existence primarily as a series of acquisitions and conventions. In fact, it might be argued that true awareness and self-consciousness are not a given in our modern society, where most of our actions, motivations and convictions are quite often conditioned by an unconscious collective mind, which is already imbued with religious, political and economical prejudices (Ferrero & Di Terlizzi 2007). But perhaps through in-depth knowledge of those few cultures and traditions that retain certain characteristics that have survived throughout the centuries – or through a voyage to discover what is different – we might have the possibility of gaining a better understanding of our own selves, our identity and culture, if not our very origins. Furthermore, we would have the opportunity of seeing ourselves from outside, as if, thanks to being magically in tune with the unknown world thus encountered, we could become capable of seeing ourselves with the eyes of a foreigner.

Making music, a basic activity of human beings in all cultures and traditions, is part of this overall knowledge and experience, and therefore, it would also be necessary within the world of Western music to develop a different awareness of its expressive methods and of its specific characteristics, including a comparison with non-Western musical cultures. Christopher Small offers us assistance in this regard in his book *Musicking* (1998), which can in fact be seen as a mirror of musical situations in Western society, for those who have the courage to look. This text brings to light the hidden meanings of our own musicking, meanings that we have never dared observe with such (the author's) ever vigilant and attentive eyes. Small is simultaneously the foreigner and us. It is as if he has returned from a long voyage among other musical cultures and offered us an alien vision, as already described, from outside our musical universe; and he allows us to see that this universe is nothing more than a small island inside a much larger archipelago, which can only be enriched by intelligent and sensitive confrontation with 'everything musical' from which it originates and of which, whether we like it or not, it is only a part.

Musicking is the verb that encompasses the very essence of Small's thought. In fact, at the moment that it becomes possible to detach ourselves from the idea of music as a separate object, we find a

door that is open to a much vaster vision of the phenomenon of music. The experience of *making* music becomes centralised, a living entity, made up of many individuals and, thus, necessarily, of relationships that determine its expression. Small is highly interested in these relationships, these being in and of themselves the reason for, and demonstration of, musicking.

Small clearly states that there is no musical event that does not include within itself all those who have contributed to its accomplishment: from those who have prepared the venue to those who will produce the music and those who will listen to it. Therefore, all who are a part of the musicking have an influence on it. Furthermore, no element can be considered as being without influence if it has contributed to the realisation of the performance. Hence, even the venue itself is significant, as is the moment in which the performance takes place. All of these elements express a series of meanings that are intrinsic and extrinsic to musicking, or better, that have, or have not, specifically 'musical' value. It is for this reason that I conceive of musicking, as explicated by Small, as a 'mirror' of the society in which it appears, or of a part of it, and of its internal and external relationships, of its values, its ethics, its religiosity or absence of religiosity, of its politics and so on (factors that are also carefully analysed in Small's second volume, *Music of the Common Tongue* which preceded *Musicking*).

This must necessarily lead to a strong re-evaluation of the potential power of music to effect social change. I would argue that if musicking is the expression of the society in which it is performed, then those doing the musicking may be able to influence that society at the moment in which it expresses relationships and content that are new, revolutionary or even subversive. This is as true for music performed at a concert of Western classical music, which is typically framed within hierarchical structures, as it is for musical experience linked to school music education. In this sense, musical training, in an orchestral setting, for young and even very young people, could give them a true power to rebuild a society's values, towards a new "potential society", quoting Small's first book, *Music, Society, Education* (1977: 209), in the event that their music teachers were given the space and the possibility of acting freely – something that rarely happens. In this first of his three books, Small already deals with this aspect of musicking in connection with the important responsibility that music teachers should take on in their delicate and complex duty to educate children, or better, to initiate them into the world of music, in an attempt to reconsider them as *artists* rather than *consumers*, allowing them "the opportunity to make

music in the present tense”, and in this way to “acknowledge the creative power of children in art” (Small 1977: 216).

For Small, musicking is not just a question of performers and an audience. It is a more highly complex phenomenon that requires a far-reaching sociological and ideological analysis. To do this, he begins with the most classic example that Western musical culture can offer: a symphonic concert in a modern auditorium. Reading his words, a change in my vision occurred which cannot be defined as anything other than ‘illumination’. Small takes us by the hand and leads us along a path that can really shake up our identity as musicians in a positive and constructive sense, although beginning with the ‘deconstruction’ of the individual components of our musical formation, almost as if along an ‘initiatory death’, which brings to mind the one frequently ritualized in some of the cultures and traditions that have survived throughout the centuries, as mentioned above. And, just as happened then, we, too, can finally really see and then also enrich our own beloved music, thanks to the illuminated vision of the foreigner.

### **Educational conducting: The philosophy of Christopher Small applied within the conductor-young orchestra relationship**

This change of vision in his or her musical world can happen in any specific work sector of the modern Western musician. Small has not specifically linked his ideas to the complex world of conducting, but establishing and deepening such a link is certainly possible. In the Western music system, the role of the orchestral conductor is one of the most prestigious; it is a role that has always been characterised by the power that he (rarely she) undoubtedly possesses. The management of that power takes place primarily, though not exclusively, through the relationship between the conductor and the members of the orchestra. Considering that Small’s work is concentrated around the issues of power relationships in musicking, the link mentioned above is thus addressed.

Extant literature on the most renowned orchestra directors is concerned almost exclusively with the artistic aspects of their work, and rarely the social or educational ones, as can be seen for example in Karajan’s biography (1989) and in historical studies about leading conductors (as in Lebrecht 1991). As we have seen, from a Smallian vision, which I would dare to define as holistic, this literature turns out to be deeply limited, and neglects to acknowledge that these artistic, social and educational aspects are, in fact, inevitably in constant interplay with the practice of orchestral

conducting, taking on an ever-increasing significance in youth orchestras in particular. Here, there is a strong teacher-student power relationship (one of the three “big issues” described by Rudduck and Fielding (2006) in their recent seminal work on student voice), which means a sizeable responsibility for the conductor. Furthermore, student-student musical relationships are also expressed through orchestral roles. If these relationships are to be understood, and even changed, it is fundamentally important for every conductor, who may indeed be reconceived as ‘teacher-conductor’, to acquire greater knowledge of the hierarchies that the orchestral world implies. With this in mind, applying Smallian philosophy to working with a youth orchestra, which is here defined as ‘educational conducting’, turns out to be not only appropriate, but also highly useful and desirable. In what follows I will sketch a possible Smallian perspective on three specific activities characteristic of orchestral musicking within the context of youth orchestras, all coming under a general category of assessment.

In the field of youth orchestra conducting, the assessment factor is presented in three possible forms:

- possible evaluations of the work carried out, often requested by conservatories and schools with orchestras
- entrance auditions
- assigning orchestral roles

I would like to approach each of these forms from alternative perspectives that afford the possibility of reconceptualisation of practices now so ingrained as to carry an aura of ‘truth’ and inevitability. Orchestral roles are based upon deeply entrenched hierarchies; I will propose a reimagining of the very notion of ‘hierarchy’ in the concept of ‘positive hierarchies’. Auditions are immediately understood as a process of selection and the associated discarding of whomsoever is not selected; again, I will suggest another idea of what it could mean to audition. But the first in my list above carries fundamental implications for the sense, building of and even detriment to a student’s sense of musical identity, and it is to a brief discussion of this that I now turn.

### **Students’ identity and performance assessment**

According to Fautley (2010), as musicians we all know what quality in music is, and, I would add, this is exactly what we want to convey to our students. In his celebrated explication of quality, Pirsig (1974: 187) explains that “for all practical purposes [quality] really does exist” but he is clear that there is a profound problem with knowing what it actually *is*. If defining exactly the nature of this

quality is problematic, so then is - consequently - measuring it. As Fautley (2010: 7) points out, we cannot avoid asking the question: “if we cannot define what quality is, how can we assess it?” Even if it is true that we can create a rather precise system for gradual technical learning of an instrument within classical music tradition (as can be seen in the English grade system or in the Italian course system), it is also true that this is very difficult to do for the musical, interpretive, creative, artistic development of students. And it is in the artistic and not the technical aspects that it becomes difficult to measure the quality of performances.

At this point I cannot of course propose a solution to such a knotty problem, which would very probably be quite radical in a Smallian vision, since the concept of assessment is rather far from the concept of musicking. However, I have found that a useful first step is to redefine the importance of *marking*, using the above-mentioned ‘foreigner’s vision’, and to note that marks assigned to performances are not objective and cannot be so, as they are simply an *attempt* to measure quality, implemented with the necessarily subjective and thus limited vision of an examinations committee. If it is true that, as Small claims, “the meaning of musicking is revealed in the *relationships* brought about in its course” (Laurence 2008: 14), I would suggest that a student’s performance in an examination environment cannot be taken as an absolute model of his/her artistic qualities. For example, a performance by this same student at a concert for a summer festival would express (in Small’s words “explore, affirm and celebrate”, 1998: 142) very different cultural values and relationships. Therefore, changing the audience and the *intention* of his/her participation would also necessarily change the quality of the performance (Laurence 2008). In this way, *the very act of assessment would modify or affect the quality of the performance that is being judged* (in a way similar to the theory of quantum physics, where it is argued that it is impossible to observe an object without changing its interaction with the environment, Capra 1975). This means that marks given in an assessment cannot reflect a definitive and objective judgement of the artistic potential of a student: today’s mark cannot pre-judge the musician of tomorrow, as exemplified by many instances where examination marks do not in the end predict later musical development or accomplishment.

Accordingly, it may be argued that students must not, as Hargreaves and Marshall discuss (2003: 265), “construct their own musical identities” based on marks given to them for their musical work, but instead based upon their own unique and personal musicking experience. Hargreaves and Marshall (2003: 265) argue that

pupils might get “the idea that they are *unmusical*, perhaps because of an unwitting remark by a teacher...” and I would suggest that such a remark (in this case hardly unwitting) may as likely be inferred by a student from a mark awarded as directly stated by the person making it! When I was asked to assign marks to students who played in the orchestra at the high school where I teach, I wanted the marks to be accompanied by a certificate of participation, *separate* from the mark received. For it is *participation* -and indeed the *quality* of this participation- that characterises the value of their orchestral musicking, inasmuch as “to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance” (Small 1998: 9). I contend that the sense of this value, more than any ‘traditional’ assessment, is what may best contribute to building and sustaining students’ musical identity.

### Transforming the meaning of auditions

Auditions are traditionally used as a selective process, which means distinguishing those perceived to ‘have’ musical talent from those considered to have less or none. This is in clear contradiction with the Smallian vision that “every normally-endowed human being is born with the gift of music no less than the gift of speech” (Small 1998: 8). Therefore, in educational conducting, the audition might be reconceived as an act of musicking with educational intentions and values, and seen as a tool for growth and for confronting difficulty and attempting to overcome it, thereby improving one’s musical ability. Auditions in this new context are used to introduce new students into an orchestra, rather than being a method for determining whether or not they are worthy of taking part. Instead of listening to ‘candidates’ on their own, placing each of them in front of a ‘jury’, I choose to have them participate directly in an orchestral rehearsal, with a ‘full-immersion’ method that can be a bit shocking for the aspiring entrants, but also very useful. As they take their place in the orchestra, new students are always accompanied by a more expert musician and thus begin to establish a first musical relationship, here with the musician who shares their music stand. Via a principle of teamwork, this relationship serves to overcome the fear and tension of an audition. It is important to remember that if an assessment can, as argued above, put a student’s musical identity at risk, an audition may bring into question their sense of *belonging* to the music and the musicking.

In my own youth orchestras, I have never excluded anyone who has auditioned, from the possibility of playing. The non-selective nature of the process of these auditions may seem a

contradiction in terms, but, in fact, the word comes from the Latin *audire*, which does not mean ‘to test’, but ‘to listen’. Indeed, *an audition can be the first encounter with a student’s voice*, containing the possibility for a teacher to understand students’ educational difficulties and needs. The teacher-conductor has an opportunity at this very first meeting to explore with the student her or his musical abilities and sensitivities as well as the level of technical ability, and to establish the basis of the subsequent relationships to be developed in the ongoing musicking of the orchestra. *Listening to the new student in the most careful and profound way – indeed, in a way with a real attention to the quality of the listening – can form the basis for another, alternative conception of what it means to ‘audition’.*

### Creating positive hierarchies

I do not intend to express a false vision by which everyone in art is ‘equal’ and there is no search for quality. Small himself says: “That does not mean that I think everybody is a potential Beethoven or Louis Armstrong” (Small 2006). Everyone is different in their ability to *do* and make art (what is commonly known as talent), and this difference needs to be evaluated to generate high artistic quality. In orchestral work, this takes place through precise hierarchies. Laurence (2010: 248) reminds us that “we can *music* according to, and making, ideal relationships which promote inclusion and peace, but equally in a way which celebrates relationships of hierarchy, power and alienation”. It is therefore important to know how to use orchestral hierarchies carefully in order to express values based on the social collaboration of diverse roles rather than on competition and the dominance of the strongest musician. I would propose here the idea of ‘positive hierarchies’, wherein there might in turn be established ‘empathic relationships’ rather than ‘power relationships’, these being central issues of concern in Laurence’s (2008) discussion of the conceptual links between musicking and empathy.

It is commonly believed that a section leader is the most technically mature member of an orchestra. This perception is in fact inaccurate and incomplete. A good leader must, by necessity, also be a mature person socially, someone capable of handling relationships with the various members of their section, such that s/he can work better and collaborate with all the other orchestra sections. The enormous educational potential for this work is obvious. As already mentioned above, it is not difficult to evaluate who is most adapted for this role if you take the students’ level of technical knowledge into account. This is a necessary starting

point, since a leader who is not technically skilled would not be credible to his or her fellow musicians. But it is also important to consider many aspects of a leader’s attributes beyond the solely technical. Once more, listening to, and being prepared to discuss with, the (collective) students’ voice is likely to be helpful, because, as Finney (2010: 14) explains, “music teachers who can work dialogically to make better music achieve satisfaction and progress”.

Rudduck (2007) further shows us how a dialogic approach can lead to positive changes in the teacher-student relationship, and I would add that in an orchestra it also leads to positive changes in the student-student relationship. For example, sometimes I have found young students with exceptional musical talent to be shy, closed and little inclined to communication either with the conductor or with their fellow musicians. Creating a dialogue with these students, listening to their needs and choosing *with them* when and if to assign them a responsible role can help them greatly in forming a solid musical identity, which eventually expands into building positive musical relationships with fellow musicians. Of course, the concepts both of ‘talent’ and of ‘musical identity’ are themselves complex, the subject of extensive and ongoing research and debate. The idea of ‘talent’ in particular is problematic, but I include it here because of its prevalence in the field of the young (or any) orchestra – with a ‘taken-for-grantedness’ that I would in fact challenge.

It can also be useful to assign leadership to students who are highly skilled technically but who, perhaps, demonstrate very competitive methods and few teamwork skills. If the teacher-conductor is able sensitively to exercise constant modification and improvement of the modes of expression of such students, this can help them build musical relationships based on respect and support of fellow students who are technically less advanced. Thus, the hierarchical relationships of the classical orchestral system can become a means for creating positive musical relationships based on cooperation to reach a common goal, within an orchestra to which everyone, without distinction, belongs and is permitted individual ways of expression.

### *Exercising empathy and being an inspirational leader: Conducting skills, traditional scores, and pedagogy re-envisioned*

Laurence, while warning that although the human activity of musicking can be and generally is still most often used to maintain relationships of power, nevertheless reminds us that “music is [also] often seen to unite us and also to promote our self-awareness and self-esteem, mutual tolerance, sense

of spirituality, intercultural understanding, ability to cooperate...” (Laurence 2008: 13-14). Boyce-Tillman (2008) also enlightens us as to how these values (both intrinsic and extrinsic), and particularly empathy, interact in musical experience. When working with the young orchestra, the responsibility for what method is used to transmit these values is in the hands of the teacher-conductor. To generate positive musical relationships with students, which promote development and affirmation of their musical identities, the conductor must express an authoritative rather than an authoritarian principle. Furedi (2009: 220) claims that “teachers must exercise authority in a manner that is unambiguous and clearly understood by their pupils”; I would rather argue that teachers need to find a way to exercise power *with* the children, instead of power *over* them. Therefore, I would also argue that the traditional figure of the dictatorial Maestro must be abandoned for an insightful, tolerant and understanding leader; and every technical conducting method, every behavioural choice and every musical approach can and should express this non-traditional attitude. For example, persistent eye contact can be used to convey trust and confidence, and an appropriate tone of voice and choice of words can transmit patience and acceptance of limits; the use of fluent gestures can transmit musical meanings which are free of unnecessary tensions, and a ‘proper’ speech both before and after performances can express the real values which lie behind the act of the musicking. One specific example of the re-visioning of the figure of the Maestro might be the symbolic wearing by all, *including* the conductor, of the same ‘uniform’ during performances, specifically to symbolise the principles of sharing and of equality of value.

In classical literature, the score is considered to be an untouchable text, as we can see in Meier (2009). Thinking that a re-arranged score is unacceptable or even not musically beautiful just because it is not the original, is a false myth of the Western classical music system. And it is here that once again we are helped by the vision of the ‘foreigner’, Christopher Small, when he asserts that the essence of music “lies not in created works but in the act of performance” (Small 2006). Perhaps it might be added that music is transformative in nature, while it becomes real in the present. Transforming classical scores into flexible allies and selecting pieces that can be adapted to the different learning needs of students leads us to practising a musical repertory that is not exclusively ‘classical’. This is most valuable in educational conducting where classical music is not considered as the ‘only’ music possible: once more, we follow Small’s thought, and attend to the

performance and the relationships in the musicking of that performance, seeing now the musical ‘work’ as he saw it –[existing] “to give performers something to perform” (Small 1998: 8).

Froehlich (2007: 115) suggests that “together, musicianship and educatorship determine the actions a teacher chooses during the music instructional process”, and she shows how these interact in a ‘good’ music teacher as the students get to know their musical selves. With this in mind, I hope to continue exploring the vision of Christopher Small and its link with pedagogical and philosophical principles in orchestral conducting of the young orchestra. I hope here to have contributed to opening up a little more awareness of the issues that arise from this consideration, and of persuading my reader of their relevance in what I argue as a profound need to re-evaluate and indeed reconceptualise the part played in their musicking by the teacher-conductor of the young orchestra.

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