Students’ Performance Interpretation of Conductors’ Gestures

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Abstract

Conductor is one of the most important person in an orchestra. Their job is more than just waving their hands in front of the musicians in the orchestra. Their job is to bring out the music in terms of the interpretation and expressions. Furthermore, a conductor must also know to differentiate between the professional orchestra and the amateur orchestra. The professional orchestra is basically consisting of many experienced musicians who have been joining several orchestras throughout their carrier, but different with amateur orchestra whereby the musicians consist merely beginner or young musicians who are still in learning process. Therefore, it is very important to know because they did not know the gestures by the conductor at some point, which is crucial for orchestra player. Therefore, this research was done to find out the student’s performance interpretation towards conductor’s gestures. Results from this research indicate that the conductor’s gestures really affect their performance interpretation. It is very important to their performance even though they somehow kind of not really understand some of the gestures given and they know that they will need more time and opportunities to gain more experience in playing in the orchestra.

Keywords: amateur orchestra, conductor, conductor’s gestures, orchestra

Background

Orchestra is one of the important values in modern society. In the orchestra itself, they have their own organization chart. In an orchestra, it will have a leader for each section which is called principal. It consists of 1st violin principal, 2nd violin principal, viola principal, cello principal, double bass principal, woodwind principal, brass principal and percussion principal. In the orchestra also, it will have only one concertmaster or concertmistress. A concertmaster is the principal violin player of the group. He serves as a public representative of the orchestra. At the start of a concert, he makes his own entrance, greeting the audience in the processes. He serves as a liaison between the conductor and the orchestra. The concertmaster relays and helps better communicate the conductor's vision and ideas. On the flip side, he also communicates messages from the orchestra to the conductor. These messages could be basic questions regarding the music and the interpretation. Next, the most important person for every orchestra is the conductor. Conductor is the leader for the orchestra. The conductor’s instrument is very different because for every musician, they have an instrument to play, but for conductors, the musicians (orchestra) are the instruments for him to play. The conductor of an orchestra does far more than wave a baton at professional musicians, although without that baton many performances would suffer. An orchestra does not go into autopilot mode during a performance, even though individual members may know their parts flawlessly by that point. The conductor of an orchestra must also become intimately familiar with all the musical pieces selected. The most important thing that the conductor does is to conduct the music. Every
gesture of the conductor is somehow may appear to be lyrical reaction to the music. He is not only giving the tempo, but the most important thing is the interpretation (dynamic) of a piece. Besides that, a conductor also must know how to differentiate between conducting professional orchestra and non-professional orchestra which is amateur orchestra. UiTM Symphony Orchestra (UiSO) is an amateur orchestra. The players for the orchestra consist of students in UiTM Faculty of Music who are currently enrolled in diploma in music and also degree in music. This orchestra was conducted by several conductors such as Mr. Mustafa Fuzer Nawi, Mr. Ho Chee Kiang, Mr Kevin Field, just to name a few. This orchestra also had performed for various functions whether for government functions, corporate functions and private functions.

Aims of the Study

This study is to discover on the student’s performance interpretation of conductor’s gestures because the non-professional orchestra consists of many young musicians which most of them are students from both diploma and degree which are still lack of knowledge because they are still in learning process and new to this orchestra performance. Three research questions are posited, namely:

1. How do they understand the gestures or cue by the conductor?
2. How does it affect the orchestra’s interpretation during a performance?
3. Why is it important to do that during a performance?

Literature Review

Conducting is a fascinating art form. Despite having no direct control over the sound being produced the conductor is able to drastically affect how a piece of music sounds solely through the use of gesture (Bradshaw and Ng, 2008). According to Hollis (1999), conducting is more than waving your arms in front of the band. The conductor has two primary responsibilities. Firstly, to start the ensemble, to establish a clear, uniform tempo, and keep it throughout the performance. Next, the purpose of conducting is to help the musical quality of the piece (expression, dynamics, cues and etc.). A conductor also is somehow must have the ability to inspire the performers. In other words, they must have the leadership, hypnotic power, contagious enthusiasm, and also a good teaching ability, for example during rehearsal where the conductor will show the musicians how to play the music (Foss, 2004). According to Foss (2004) again, a conductor also must develop in each of his performers: a desire to belong to the group, a pride of membership when accepted, the willingness to practice the music on his own time and to keep his technique and himself in top shape, the willingness to attend all rehearsals regularly and punctually, despite conflicts and inconveniences, the willingness to work hard at rehearsal, and not just have a pleasant time running through the easy parts, and the desire to give the utmost, technically and emotionally, when the concert takes place.

In 2008, Bradshaw and Ng stated that the conductor can communicate a vast amount of information using hand movements alone such as tempo, dynamic or expressive information. This system aims to extract these features from the movements and feed them back to the user using several appropriate methods including sonification, visualisation and vibrations in the controller. According to Ruttkay, Huang, Eliens, gesture is to express, redundantly or additively relative to what is being told. Besides that, gestures also improve the elicitation of the spoken text, by punctuating it with special gestures to indicate: syntactical chunks (contrast, enumeration, new topic), communicational coordination (listening, turn giving/taking). According to them again, a simple hand gesture is a ‘phrase’, consisting of the 5 following components, preparation – the arm and hand are brought to the start position and configuration of the gesture, pre-stroke hold – the hand is waiting before the real characteristic motion is to be performed, stroke – the motion typical for the gesture is performed, between a start and end position.
of the stroke, following a more or less restricted 3D trajectory and acceleration profile for the wrist, the orientation of the hand and the form of the hand-shape, post-stroke hold – the hand stands still in the end position for some time, retraction – the hand return to the normal resting position.

There are also two types of conductors. The first one is the traditional conductor where it is more to the time beating, and the second conductor is the modern conductor where it is more beyond then time beating; the expressive gestures (Green, 1981). According to Green (1981) again, the traditional conductors are usually more to the basic techniques conducting where they are only more to the business of the right hand which is the baton. The conductors are more to setting the tempo and stopping the sound. So in other word, it is more to giving time beating. Compared with the modern conductors, they are more to expressive gesture. The expressive gesture can be divided into two categories, the first one is the active gestures, whereby it required response from the players, and the second one is the passive gestures, whereby it is asking only for silence and no sound from the players. In 1982, Linton stated in his book that the main function of the conductor also is to communicate through movement with the singers or players during rehearsal and public performance. Most of the conductors’ movements are from the arm and hand. This movement can be divided into two types, the first one is planes of movement, and the second one is movement of joints. The planes of movement can be divided into another two sections which are vertical plane and lateral plane. Vertical plane is a movement where the hand moves from top to bottom or from bottom to top. Lateral plane is a movement, where the hand moves from side to side of the home-based position which is right - left. Next is the movement of joints, where it consists of elbow, shoulder, wrist and hand. All this movement is very important for disciplined, expressive and coordinated conducting.

Methodology

This research was conducted in both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The data has been collected via questionnaire using online tools which was google form and some interview with selected students from the orchestra. The subjects were basically the students who were the members of the UiTM Symphony Orchestra. The research process involved such as: reading of necessary literature on the topic from books or journal, identification of respondents, distributing the questionnaires and analysis of data. The questionnaires were developed in order to obtain their understanding on how they interpret the conductors’ gestures.
Analysis of Data

Figure 1. Department

Figure 2. Section in the orchestra

From the surveys that have been distributed among 50 students who are currently enrolled in the UiTM Symphony Orchestra, 44 of them responded and 56.8% out of the respondents are from Diploma students while 43.2% are from Degree students (Figure 1). From the respondents also, it shows that the highest population is from the strings section with 56.8% followed by the brass section with 20.5% (Figure 2). Furthermore, most of the respondents have experienced almost 1 year in the orchestra with 34.1% (Figure 3).
Besides that, almost all respondents in the orchestra (75%) have experienced performing not only with UiTM Symphony Orchestra but also with outside orchestra (see Figure 4). Which also shows that almost all of them are very familiar with the conductor’s cueing and gestures. Because when asked, all of them agreed that the conductors job in the orchestra are to give beat/tempo, dynamics, expression, cueing and more (Figure 5)
Even though they know that the function of the conductors is to lead the orchestra, but they still need to understand and focus to the conductor’s gestures. The result shows only half of them (50%) really focus to the conductor (Figure 6). There are still students who kind of unsure how to interpret the conductor’s gestures or intention. As can be seen in Figure 7 most of the students seems have a difficulty to interpret the expression given by the conductor’s gestures. Even though all of them agreed that it is very important to the orchestra to bring out the expression and the character of a certain repertoire.

**Figure 5.** Total of students understanding towards conductors’ job

**Figure 6.** Total of students focusing towards conductors
Figure 7. Total of students know to interpret the conductors’ gestures

Some of the student said that it is very important to produce a better and balance sound from all the players. One of the respondent said that a conductor basically leads the orchestra when playing a repertoire but somehow a blurry gesture may lead to misunderstanding therefore making the players struggle to play together as one. According to the respondents experienced playing in the UiTM Symphony Orchestra, it can be concluded that they feel comfortable with the conductor’s gesture even though sometimes they may seem quit not understanding certain gestures. One of the respondent said that “The conductor from UiTM Symphony Orchestra always giving his best. Starting with Mr Mustafa until Mr Kevin, UiTM always gives the best conductor to their students. We also learn different ways on producing good music”. Another respondent said, “My experience with Sir Kevin Field is a precious and educational moment, I had learned a lot of thing especially performer etiquette from him, he taught to always subdivide the tempo from his gesture, to me it is an important that I will remember throughout my musician’s life”.

Conclusion

After the research that I have done, I can make a conclusion that most of the students in the UiTM Symphony Orchestra can interpret the gestures make by the conductors even though there were some gestures which they not familiar but they tried to understand it because they know that it can affect the orchestra’s performance. This is because a single movement by a conductor will give a huge meaning towards the orchestra. In order to do that, a conductor must first elaborate, explain and teach them what he or she wants to do. This usually happen during the rehearsal. From the musicians’ side, they as students must join the orchestra at the early age because this early experience can be very important not just to learn the repertoire of the orchestra like overtures, symphonies, suites, concertos and many more, but also to understand the conductor’s gesture and to learn to react to the many style of conducting. All this gesture is important not only for professional orchestra but also to non-professional or amateur orchestras. It is because music should be alive, and there should be some spontaneous moment in it, inspiration. Otherwise it is dead. Another thing is that it will make a bond between the conductor and the orchestra resulting a good performance to deliver to the audiences. Furthermore, all this gestures happened both naturally and according to the piece. To gain that, a conductor must first know the basic technique in conducting. There are a lot of interpretations in the music, so a conductor somehow will act accordingly to the interpretation of the piece and the act will make the conductor do certain gestures and it will affect the musicians in the orchestra for example if the conductor does a big motion it will indicate loud or forte sound. Conducting the amateur orchestra are almost the same as conducting the professional
orchestra. The difference is that the professional orchestra already understood the gestures of the conductor and what is the conductor is trying to do but for amateur orchestra they still in learning process to understand certain gesture of the conductor, so the conductors must first explain to them all the gestures they did. As a conclusion, both parties the conductors and the musicians in the orchestra must have a connection and an understanding to perform or deliver the music more feel and meaningful to the audiences. Again, the conductor’s gestures are very important also to the non-professional orchestra to make the music alive.

References


Biography

Ahmad Munir Mahzair is currently a violin lecturer at the UiTM Faculty of Music and heads the Bachelor of Music Performance Department. A well-qualified musician, Munir holds a Diploma in Music and a Bachelor in Music Performance from UiTM where he studied violin with Radzali Mustaffa and Mustafa Fuzer Nawi. He pursued his Master of Music Performance in the United States under several renowned violin Professors such as Stephen Miahky, Solomiya Ivakhiv and Dawn Wohn. He has performed both locally and internationally under various renowned conductors including Mustafa Fuzer Nawi and Dato’ Johari Salleh as well as recorded with renowned local artists such as Yuna, Aizat Hamdan, Syamel and many more. Munir regularly conducts masterclasses and violin coaching at the invitation of the Ocean Institute of Audio and Technology and Putrajaya Presint 16 Committee, to name a few. He also founded the Moon Air Quartet where he actively performs.

Juwairiyah Zakaria holds Master of Music (M.Mus) in Piano Pedagogy from West Virginia University, USA (2014). She is an alumni of Faculty of Music in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) for Diploma (2009) and Bachelor Degree (Hons) in Music Performance (2011). She was awarded the Young Lecturer Scholarship in 2012 from UiTM and Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia to pursue her master program. For her post-graduate study in USA, she gained more exposure and experience in both teaching and performing (solo and chamber) under the supervision of Professor Dr. Peter Amstutz and Professor Dr. Lucy Mauro. Juwairiyah was appointed as an instructor and accompanist for Permata Seni Koir in 2016. As for academia, she has presented and published three journal articles. Currently, she is a lecturer specializing in piano performance and pedagogy in the in Faculty of Music, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam Malaysia since March 2015 till present