

So now there's nothing left to wish upon, except for passing cars  
The cacophony of city lights is drowning out the stars  
- Ani Di Franco

Where would we be without a conductor?



Our *Swing over the Pacific* concert was a huge success, enjoyed by both the audience and the performers. In achieving such a success we must acknowledge the contribution of our conductor, Jennifer Barnes, pictured above with President Bruce Rowland.

Conductors have not always been considered necessary. In 1709 the following opinion was published in London:

*Some Years since the Master of the Musick in the Opera at Paris had an Elboe Chair and Desk plac'd on the Stage, where, with the Score in one Hand, and a Stick in the other, he beat Time on a Table put there for that purpose, so loud, that he made a greater Noise than the whole Band, on purpose to be heard by the Performer. By degrees they remov'd this Abuse from the Stage to the Musick Room, where the Composer beats the Time in the same manner, and as loud as ever... Founded more upon an ill Habit than any Necessity there was for it, as doing more harm than good... because the Eye was too much Distracted, being obliged to mind the beating of the Measure, and the Score at the same time; besides, it kept the Singer and the Player in too much Subjection, and Fear of Errors.*

Times changed. When the famous conductor Louis Spohr visited London in the 1820s he insisted on using a baton. He wrote: *I took my stand ... in front of the orchestra, drew my directing baton from my coat pocket, and gave the signal to begin. Quite alarmed at such a novel proceeding some of the directors protested against it. ... The triumph of the baton as a tune-giver was decisive, and no one was seen any more seated at the piano during the performance of sym-phonies and overtures*

There are now two main lines of conducting, There are those who think that the aim should be to faithfully represent the intentions of the composer. They want the audience reaction to be "This is right", rather than "This is beautiful". However Ralph Vaughan Williams disagrees:

*We also know now that the composer is not necessarily the best interpreter of his own works. This may appear to be contradictory; if a composer wants to play his own music in a certain way, is that an indication that this is the way it should be played? I am afraid that the argument does not hold water. A composer can write music which is quite beyond his own capacity as a performer. One of the notable examples in history was Franz Schubert, who cast aside one of his own piano works, exclaiming: 'Only the devil can play this!' Obviously the remark was not intended to be taken seriously, but the fact that Schubert was not a virtuoso performer did not mean that he could not compose music ideally suited for others to perform.*

*Why composers who are not professional conductors believe that they can make a hundred players play their own music just the way they want is a mystery. Anybody can buy a piano and practise scales, but how many people can buy an orchestra and practise conducting?*

Debussy, while conducting his *Nocturnes*, mistook his own time signature and tried to stop the orchestra, but they had been well rehearsed by their usual conductor and continued to the end without his help. Debussy burst into tears, but the ovation was such that he conducted an encore.

There is another kind of conductor, who throws a new light on old works and is guided by the inspiration of the moment. My *Grove's Dictionary* urges caution:

*This 'personal' method of conducting is liable to great abuses in the hands of an incompetent artist. Every pettifogging band-master must now have his 'reading' of the great masterpieces, [which] usually consists of a strict disregard for the composer's intentions coupled with a gross exaggeration of nuance and a distortion of the true rhythm. Such a conductor as this last had much better confine himself to merely beating time ; then, at all events, the audience will hear the notes and will be able to draw their own conclusions.*

My Oxford Companion advises: *Probably the main part of a conductor's duty was to set the right tempo at the outset, to restore a unanimous beat when the singers seemed in danger of parting company, and, from a knowledge of the composition as a whole, to bring in voices accurately and properly at their 'entries'.*



When Beethoven was in his prime the old method of conducting from the keyboard or by the chief violinist was giving way to an external conductor. Apparently Beethoven's style could be quite dramatic:

*At a pianissimo Beethoven would crouch down so as to be hidden by his desk, and then as the crescendo grew would gradually rise, beating all the time, until at the fortissimo he would spring into the air as if wishing to float on the clouds.*

Beethoven also had the rather confusing habit of adding improvisations to his own music, even when playing the piano in orchestral concerts.

Felix Mendelssohn, when conducting, would beat time for the first few bars, then listen and applaud with the audience, unless some special effect required his attention. He created controversy as the first conductor of the famous Gerwandhaus concerts in Leipzig to insist on directing both the choir and the orchestra – with a baton.

Should women conduct? Not according to Finnish composer and conducting coach Jorma Panula. In an interview published by the Finnish news broadcaster MTV, Panula was asked if it is a good thing that women conductors enter the profession. Panula replied with a firm "I do not!"



*Limelight* magazine reports that Panula (who, by the way, is 83) is currently teaching a masterclass in Vassa, Finland, where half of the participants are women hailing from all over Europe.

Last year, *Limelight* reported on Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko stating that a female conductor's sexuality could be detrimental to the performance of a professional orchestra. "Men often have less sexual energy and can focus more on the music," he stated. "A sweet girl on the podium can make your thoughts drift towards something else."

Thankfully the members of the Newcastle University Choir, even the males, understand that conducting is not a matter of gender. Some of the basses were a little miffed by the remarks about their sexual energy, but managed to concentrate on the music nevertheless, even in numbers like *There is Nothing Like a Dame*.

How do you become a conductor? The Oxford Junior Companion to Music advises aspirants:

*If any young reader has to do any conducting... it is a good thing to practice a bit in one's bedroom in front of a looking-glass.*

Thank you Dr Jennifer Barnes. Your energy and obvious love of what we were doing was inspirational, and we'd love to have you back again, regardless of what Jorma Panula might think.

Newcastle University Choir  
presents

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An uplifting and entertaining celebration  
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with  
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Terence Koo Trio

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The Great Hall

*Cacophony* is edited by Peter McCloy on behalf of the Newcastle University Choir, who do not necessarily share the views of the editor. To contribute or to communicate, email us at [newsletter@newcastleuniversitychoir.com](mailto:newsletter@newcastleuniversitychoir.com)

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