

The Conductor as Chamber Coach: Strategies to Make Rehearsals Student-Centered

Evan Feldman

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
North Carolina, USA*

As conductors, particularly of young people and amateur musicians, it is easy to fall into the paradigm of the autocratic conductor who listens to the band, surveys for errors, and barks orders at the musicians. The cycle then repeats. But as educators – and indeed conductors are all educators to some degree – this approach is inefficient, superficial, and one-dimensional.

In educational theory, the autocratic method is called *teacher-centered* learning, in which the teacher leads activities while students passively receive information. Teachers usually do this through lectures without interaction or classroom discussion. When students practice what they have learned – usually through repetitive exerci-

ses – the teacher evaluates and reports mistakes. Most of us are familiar with this style; indeed, it should be familiar to anybody who has ever performed as part of a band or orchestra, or seen the movie *Whiplash*. But although lectures and alpha-dog conductors have their place, particularly for conveying raw knowledge and facts, research suggests it fails to create independent problem-solvers who deeply understand a topic¹.

In contrast, student-centered learning pivots to students as the engines of their own understanding. It relates to the

¹ ALPER, LYNNE. «Problem-Based Mathematics - Not Just for the College-Bound». *Educational Leadership* 53, 8 (1996), pp. 18-21. BRUSH, Thomas, and John SAYE. «The use of embedded scaffolds with hypermedia-supported student-centered learning». *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia* 10, 4 (2001), pp. 333-356.

broader topics of constructivism and discovery learning, in which students create, or construct, their own knowledge with the help of a teacher. Studies demonstrate that if students are given tools, time, and coaching, they can essentially teach new concepts to themselves based on their understanding of previous concepts, and that the breadth and depth of this learning occurs without sacrificing the content acquisition that teacher-centered instruction focuses on².

Student-centered learning tasks students to evaluate their mistakes and piece together an understanding of new knowledge. The process can seem stilted and inefficient at first, particularly in contrast to the (seemingly) instant success in the teacher-centered learning approach of conveying information directly to the students.

So, why isn't the direct approach preferred over waiting for allowing students to devise their own methods? Firstly, students are more likely to forget material they have memorized through teacher-centered learning; second, it is easy to confuse «I taught this» with «my students learned this». Student-centered learning is more likely to last; and students who construct their own learning can re-apply the same concepts repeatedly and use their new knowledge as the building blocks of more advanced concepts.

The symptoms of short-term learning constantly appear in music rehearsal. How often, for example, do conductors say,

«More *staccato* in measure 25» to subsequently experience frustration when the same issue reappears shortly after. So, the conductor asks again for more *staccato*, which works only until the next rehearsal, at which point he has to remind the group once again.

Thus we see the classic problem of a teacher-centered rehearsal: the conductor finds the problem and tells the students what to fix. And, they do indeed fix it in the short term. But in the long-term they remain ill equipped to locate and resolve problems on their own. They rely wholly on us, and when considering a group of over fifty students, the work required on their behalf is substantial.

The alternative is to make rehearsals more student-centered. The goal is to change the conductor's role to that of a coach of chamber music—someone who facilitates achievement. To be sure, even chamber music coaches sometimes offer direct and concrete instruction and expect the musicians to implement it. Student-centered teaching is not intended as a wholesale replacement for the classic conductor/ensemble relationship, but rather as a tool for promoting student engagement, independence, and deep understanding.

Using student-centered instruction in rehearsal usually revolves around a version of the following: Focus a player's attention to listen to specific musical issues instead of absolving them of the responsibility of being aware while they play (after all, isn't it the conductor's job to listen and give instruction?). Hearing a problem, and thus being aware of the problem, is tantamount to resolving it. If you're looking for musical is-

² GALLAGHER, Shelagh A., and William J. STEPIEN. «Content acquisition in problem-based learning: Depth versus breadth in American studies». *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* 19, 3 (1996), pp. 257-275.

sues—specific musical issues—you’re more likely to find them.

Indeed, I believe I could train a total stranger—someone who has no prior conducting ability beyond being able to keep a steady beat—to run a productive rehearsal using only one exclamatory word. This person would start the group, give a cut-off, and then say «Listen!» The second time it would be directed towards the clarinets. «Listen, clarinets!» Then, other groups: «Listen, brass! You really need to listen!» In this experiment my conductor stooge gives no further instruction, only the encouragement for the musicians to be aware of what they’re playing and the hint that a problem exists. Implying the group to «listen» challenges them: «I, as the conductor, know there’s a problem. But can you find it?» More often than not they will; and if they find it they have a chance of fixing it themselves.

No doubt after 10 minutes of this experiment the ensemble will reveal my guest as a fraud. But an experienced conductor can refine and focus this «listen» technique by changing teacher-centered instruction into student-centered challenges. Instead of «Clarinets, you aren’t holding the dotted quarter note long enough in m. 5,» it becomes a challenge: «Clarinets, listen to your rhythm in measure 5. It should be with the saxophones». Similarly, «Brass, you are releasing too late in m. 8» becomes «Brass, listen to your release in m. 8». Another example: «Percussion, you’re not together with the tubas» becomes «Percussion, listen to see if you’re locking in with the tubas on the offbeats».

All of these listen challenges are subtle but meaningful twists on direct fee-

dback. With direct feedback, students sit passively and make an adjustment...and then sit passively until they are instructed again. But with listen challenges, students evaluate their own playing and arrive at the improvement through substantially different means. «I am going to release right on beat 4 because the teacher told me to» becomes «I am going to release right on beat 4 because I can hear that I’m not with the rest of the band». Similarly, «I’m going to hold this dotted quarter-note a tiny bit longer because that is what I was told to do» becomes «I am going to listen to the saxophones and make sure I lock in with them because I can hear I’m not with them».

An alternative to using a listen challenge is to phrase it as a question. «Trombones, is your rhythm locking in with the baritones in m. 25?» Or, «Horns, is your articulation matching the staccato of the saxophones?» «Everybody, are you able to hear the oboe solo in m. 30?» Posing a question engages someone to answer it, and by answering it they are pushed to function as an independent musician.

A variation on this idea is to challenge the group to solve a problem, but not tell them how to solve it. For example, instead of «Flutes, your rhythm is ahead: Slow down and don’t rush, « instead say «Flutes, make sure your rhythm locks in with the tuba line». This does not tell them what to do, but implicitly challenges them to listen to the tubas, evaluate whether their sound locks in, and then adjust to make sure it does. Another example: «Saxophones, you are too loud!» becomes, «Saxophones, make sure your dynamic is less than the melody». In the first version the conductor is a traffic cop,

giving the group a series of instructions they must obey. In the second version the saxophonists have to analyze for themselves who has the melody, compare their sound, and then make an adjustment.

If the conductor seeks to behave more like a chamber coach, the goal, then, is for the instrumentalists to behave as chamber players. Conductors can facilitate this not only through listen challenges, questions, and problem solving, but also by encouraging players to notate reminders in their music. I often tell my players it is more important that they listen than watch, even though many of them look quizzically at me when I say I don't care if they look at my stick – but only if they listen!

If the bassoon plays eighth notes on beat 4 and the clarinet enters on beat one, it is really the bassoonist, not me, who dictates where to come in. «Watch me!» is an autocratic and unreliable solution; «listen to where the bassoon places beat 1» is how a professional musician would solve the problem. Then I insist the player notate the bassoonist's rhythm in their part along with a reminder that the bassoon plays it. Eventually musicians identify problems and endeavor to seek out solutions without prompting from the podium. Few things are so rewarding when a player comes requests to see the score so they can

determine for themselves where they are supposed to listen in order to mark their part appropriately.

Student-centered techniques are not meant to replace traditional rehearsals, though it should be noted that its ultimate expression is the fully democratic rehearsal so beautifully modeled by self-conducting groups like the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. (Several U.S. university ensembles have experimented with rehearsals in which the conductor never says a word, though whether this is a goal worth striving for is for another discussion.) For most amateur ensembles, however, a rehearsal that only uses student-centered learning may become unwieldy, particularly for issues of technique and rehearsal management are often best led from the podium. However, there is much to be gained from student-centered learning assuming the conductor quells the instinct to jump in and correct problems directly. It is a difficult habit to break because the teacher-centered approach empowers the conductor and feels efficient, which it is, at least in the short term. Instead, if we make an investment in the musical independence of our groups by sprinkling in student-centered rehearsal approaches, we empower our students, teach with musical meaning, and earn the dividends of long-term improvement.