



How to use a musical score

How do conductors use scores?

Catherine:

This week, we're going to be looking especially at full scores. And of course, the one person in a musical environment that would usually have the full scores in front of them during a performance is the conductor, of course. So I'm here with Mark, who is a conductor, and we're going to talk a little bit about conductors and how they use the score in various different ways in their work. So I think maybe a good starting point would be to talk a little bit about what a conductor does.

Mark:

I suppose the conductor is there as the overall manager and arbiter of how the performance would go. And particularly, if you're working with very high quality professional musicians with a professional orchestra, they would know how to play all the right notes in the right place by themselves. So the conductor's role, very often, is just to try to draw that together to decide how Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, for example, is going to sound that particular week, compared with when they might have done it previously with a different conductor. On a practical, more basic level, perhaps if you're working with very complicated contemporary music. Or perhaps with young musicians, there's a little bit more about just starting and stopping the orchestra.

So we're showing how fast to play, how loud, how soft, at which points the music should perhaps slow down, or speed up, and we do all that through body language, through our gestures.

Catherine:

So I think there's an awful lot of information that a conductor communicates, using the score as a basis.

Mark:

The score, I suppose, provides us with the roadmap, the guidance, the user manual, if you like. But that's the basis of which we start to interpret the music.

Catherine:

So in your day to day work then as a conductor, and maybe also, as a teacher of conducting, what sort of things do you do with scores?

Mark:

The process begins with the conductor studying the score in as much detail and depth as he or she has time to do in that particular situation. We try to assimilate all of the information that's in the score in terms of which instruments play which music. So for example, is it just the cellos that are playing the baseline? Or are the bassoons playing the baseline along with the cellos?

So really, what we have to try to do, as you would if you were allowed to play a piece on the piano, for example, is learn how it goes so that when we're standing there in front of the orchestra, we're not reading something for the first time, because then we wouldn't be very effective. So we use the score to learn the music. We can do that in many different ways. We can sit down and crash through it on the piano, trying to play all the parts at once, seeing all the different lines, and condensing that into what might be a piano part. We can just simply read it and try to orally hear in our head how it might sound.

Of course, with today's technology, there's a fabulous resource of audio and video recordings available.

Catherine:

I think there's a huge amount of preparation that often people don't realise, as you say, just working with the score and you're learning a piece maybe for the first time. What sort of things are you looking to identify maybe on those first few reads through?

Mark:

It's analysis really, and looking at what instruments are playing when, because you don't see. If you looked at a score, perhaps we could just turn open a random page here of Beethoven Five, you would see that at some points, the whole orchestra is playing. At other points, only the strings and the bassoons are playing at the top of this page, whereas down here, everybody plays. So you're looking to see who's playing when, because that may mean that you would need to give a signal to different sections as to when to start playing. You're also looking at the dynamics of the music. When is it loud? When is it quiet? At what moment does that change?

And I might make a marking in the score to flag up or sign posts, give myself a landmark as to where that should be. I'll also be looking into the structure of the phrase. How long is a particular phrase? Because when I'm standing there in front of the orchestra, waving my arms at them, I'm trying to communicate with them as much as possible. If I'm at that time spending all my time reading what's in front of me, then I'm cutting myself off from them, and my ability

to communicate with them in real time is quite significantly diminished. So I'm using the scores as a aid memoir to the structure of peace.

So in my preparation, in my analysis, I might be making a marking to say, here's an eight bar phrase, and then an eight bar phrase, and then a seven bar phrase, so that I can glance down. Oh, yes, it's this eight bar phrase, and the clarinets come in halfway through it. And that's maybe the two pieces of information that I'll need for the next 20 seconds. I can then glance again to pick up my next little landmark that perhaps the trombones are going to play, having rested for the last 15 minutes. And therefore, it might be a good idea to give them a cue, in case they've fallen asleep or they haven't been playing, for example.

So it's a sort of never ending process. And no matter how many times you come back to a piece that you've conducted umpteen times before, you'll always find something new in the score.

Catherine:

Thank you. That's been really fascinating.

Mark:

Thank you.