More Fun than You can Throw a Baton at: Information Transfer and a Community Concert Band Conductor

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Abstract

The central theme studied in this paper is the conductor’s transfer of information (mainly verbal and motion-based) in a community concert band rehearsal. Some of my methods of data collection included interviews, unobtrusive observation, photography, and film. The findings report that the techniques used to transfer information are needed to reduce the instances of information overload and wasted rehearsal time, and improve the band’s performance cohesiveness and musical growth.

Introduction

A community concert band requires one specific individual in order to perform cohesively: a conductor. The conductor is one of the most important figures both for musical and informational reasons. Amateur musicians rely on the conductor not only for musical guidance, but for instruction. This paper highlights the methods through which a conductor provides instruction to the musicians during a regular band rehearsal, focused mainly on verbal and motion-based information.

Literature Review

Musical ensembles are given a minor level of attention by ethnographers. One important study comes from Stebbins (1996), a sociologist, who explores the social structures present in barbershop ensembles. One of the relevant concepts he discusses is “music as serious leisure.” This phrase contextualizes the motivations of the conductor and the musicians in a musical ensemble. “Serious leisure” is defined as the systematic pursuit of a hobby by an amateur. The crucial element that defines serious leisure is perseverance; through perseverance, an individual stands to gain “self-actualization, self-enrichment, [and]... feelings of accomplishment” (Stebbins 1996, 8). This concept is important for understanding the motivations of the musicians and the conductor.

Bewley (1999) studied the score annotations of one famous American orchestral conductor as an information system. These markings were organized into
categories and examined for their influence on the musical composition. The conclusions drawn from studying the markings were inductively applied to understanding the art of conducting. This study placed little emphasis on how the conductor represented the score during a rehearsal, leaving this aspect available for exploration in research.

The extent to which community bands, specifically, have been studied for informational processes is limited. Wilhjelm (1998) conducted a longitudinal study of an American community band over a fifteen year period to explore the connection between quality of musicianship and the musical programming selections. The research lens of this study focused on music education and lifelong learning. Conclusions in this study strongly indicate that musicians desire to play challenging repertoire; this contributes to their enjoyment of, and continuation with, music as a pastime.

Finally, studying information in a concert band requires consideration of the limitations of the term, “information.” Buckland (1991) concludes that what is considered to be information is situational. This is important when attempting to understand the unwritten information that is transferred in a band setting.

**Settings and Methods**

I carried out my fieldwork in the rehearsal space used by the band for their weekly practice (a room in a community centre). The curved rows of plastic chairs and music stands all face the conductor’s stand at the front of the room (Figure 1). These sixty seats are filled for two-and-a-half hours by the musicians ranging in age from 16 to 75 years. The musicians are mostly non-professionals with experience playing in high school ensembles. The purpose of the rehearsal is to practice the music programmed for an upcoming concert.

The band’s conductor, Philip, has held this role since 2002. His resume shows 29 years of experience as a high school music teacher and ensemble conductor. He is a congenial, well-liked member of the group. His duties include selecting the music to be performed; planning and leading rehearsals; and conducting the concerts. I interviewed and observed Philip and three musicians for this study.

My participation as a trumpet player in the band for the last three years, allowed me ease of access to this population as well as the opportunity to satisfy an intellectual curiosity (Lofland & Lofland, 2006). I obtained clearance to perform my field work from Philip and the band executive, and notified the band members of my study through an email. I did not encounter access limitations in my field work because of previously-formed relationships. In fact, even members who
were not selected as participants in the study offered encouragement and requested updates on my progress.

I collected data through interviews, unobtrusive observation, photographs and film. Film afforded the advantage of replaying subtle, non-verbal information being transferred from the conductor to the band and allowed me to continue to fulfill my rehearsal duties as a trumpet player. Without the film, much of the following field excerpts would not have been possible to capture with a comparable level of detail.

**Preliminary Findings**

“Be-ba-dee-da, ba-dee-da, ba-dee-da”

Turning to the first example, the following excerpt illustrates how articulation information is transferred verbally and even vocally from the conductor to the musicians. Philip cuts off the band midway through a piece to address an articulation issue he has noticed. The articulation pattern appears on the musicians’ sheet music as either dots or lines over the notes. A line informs the musician to play that note as long as possible within the limits set by the time value of the note; a dot represents an abbreviated note value (Figure 2). Philip stops the band because this articulation was missing when the band rehearsed the section:


During Philip’s demonstration of the articulation pattern for the bass line (which in this particular passage is a combination of the bassoon, baritone sax, baritones, trombones and tuba), the syllables he vocalizes do not change tones - all syllables are sung on the same note (a departure from the written sheet music which has the line played on different notes). While singing, Philip continues to conduct with his left hand (while the baton in his right stays static), snapping his fingers on each of the four beats in the bar and singing the musical line as an additional layer of information.

There are several important things to draw attention to from the field notes. First, Philip represents the articulation written on the sheet music through his voice; information is held in the syllables he sings. The ‘dee’ are sung like the notes with a line (tenuto), and the ‘da’ and ‘be’ are the dots (staccato). While the symbols on the sheet music are informational, it is challenging and time-consuming to discuss them through use of the English language. The musicians must reconcile the symbols on their music with the aural information from the conductor’s vocalisms.
What is also interesting to note is that the passage that Philip sings is not a full representation of the musicians’ sheet music. He sings his syllables on one note instead of singing the musical line as shown on the sheet music. An advantage of this approach is that by thinning out the layers of unneeded information, the receivers can focus mainly on the articulation information. And in this way, the information sent has a greater chance of being clearly received.

As the band typically has six to eight rehearsals to learn ten new pieces before the next concert (a challenge for amateur musicians), efficiency is important in this environment. Singing as an instructional method is recognized as a time-saving conducting technique. During an earlier interview, Philip articulated the usefulness of this process: “It’s the musical equivalent of “a picture’s worth a thousand words.” It’s easier to draw a tree than try to describe it. Similarly, it’s easier to sing a musical line than find the words that describe the musical line.”

So why do musicians miss or misread information on their sheet music? During an interview with Sabrina, the tenor sax player, she admits that playing an instrument in an ensemble is mentally demanding. Reading every symbol on the sheet music is challenging unless significant time is spent in practice. Even without a rush to the next concert repertoire, musicians encounter more informational cues than can ever be understood or received. Thus, the conductor has to focus the musicians’ attention on the components that he feels are most important. Philip has informed the bass line that the articulation in this section is important and should be played accurately.

Securing “the four”

For the last thirty-three years, the band’s holiday concert has upheld its tradition of performing Leroy Anderson’s ‘Christmas Festival’ (a piece of music with eight carols melded together). Despite the cumulative hours invested in this piece, it still needs to be rehearsed every year. The next excerpt demonstrates the non-verbal, visual information that Philip provides to the band through his baton motions.

As the trumpets begin the ‘God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen’ melody, Philip conducts a four-four pattern (Figure 3a). After several seconds, it is aurally noticeable that the trumpets are beginning to lag behind Philip’s beat (as represented by his baton position). Philip’s conducting style changes from a graceful baton motion to an articulated, mechanic beat in an attempt to attract the trumpets’ attention to their lagging beat. After eight bars or so, Philip cuts off the band:

*Phillip*: Trumpets... I [would] like to do it a little bit faster. I really like to do it in two more than four [starts to motion a gentle, graceful two with his right hand]. Umm, [pause] I’ll see if I can move in two. We’ll see if it works.

Philip notifies the trumpets that instead of conducting a four-four pattern (as written on the sheet music), he will conduct a two-two pattern. The two-two pattern is twice as slow as the four-four pattern and requires the trumpets to mentally subdivide the conductor’s beat into two.
Phillip restarts the band with a four-four pattern, a few bars before the trumpets enter. As the trumpets’ entrance approaches, Philip directs his eyes to the trumpets and raises his chin. As the trumpets enter, he smoothly switches into a two-two pattern (Figure 3b). Even with the prior warning, this change throws off the trumpets. The result is eleven trumpets with eleven different interpretations of the tempo. The piece falls apart and Philip cuts it off again:

Philip: “Well that didn’t work. [pause] OK, I’ll stay in four for a bar or two to help get it settled [as he says this, he is marking a four-four pattern in the air with his baton]. I’ll mark that [makes a note in his score].

After continuing to work through this section with the trumpets for several additional minutes, Philip makes adjustments to his conducting. He starts the trumpets in a four-four pattern and switches into two “when the four is secure.”

There are several key points to note from this fieldwork as it relates to both the sender (conductor) and receivers (musicians) of information. First, the conductor uses hand motions to provide tempo information to the entire band so that all musicians are playing the song at the same speed. The placement of the baton at certain locations in a consistent pattern offers musicians information about the tempo. The quicker the conductor moves the baton to these positions, the quicker the tempo - the musicians rely on the conductor to set the pace. Without this information, the musicians cannot play cohesively.

Second, not only is the tempo information important, but so is finding ‘the beat.’ ‘The beat’ refers to where the conductor’s position aligns with the notes in the bars of music. When Philip changed from a four-four pattern to a two-two pattern, he changed the beat: instead of four beats per bar, there were two, and the musicians had to reconcile this to their sheet music (Figure 4). The first time Philip switched into a two-two pattern, he did so before the beat was settled and the trumpets struggled to find it. During an earlier interview with Jay, a trumpet player in the band, he articulated that an important quality in a conductor is “very precise beats”; these beats represent information that musicians require in order to play cohesively. Within minutes of the entire band witnessing the trumpets struggling to find Philip’s tempo, a different misinterpretation occurs, this time with the volume (dynamics). The following excerpt demonstrates Philip being challenged by the baritones not receiving his motion-based information.

In this next section of the piece, the clarinets are playing the melody and the baritones are providing the accompaniment. After a few seconds, Philip looks up from his score at the baritones because they are not playing the proper dynamics marked in
their parts. While continuing to conduct a two-two pattern with his baton in his right hand, Philip keeps his eyes on the baritones and raises his left hand above the motions of the baton and his fingers start to wiggle gently. The baritones continue to play loudly. Philip brings his left hand up above his head for a few more seconds, increasing the wiggling motion in his left hand and keeping his gaze on the baritones. No change. Finally, with his eyes locked on the baritones, Philip brings both hands above his head and he slams them through the air, up and down, several times until the whole band comes to a halt:

Philip: GUYS! [he brings his left hand above his head and moves it in a straight line downwards to the midway point of his torso] [smiling] I’m not short of throwing something; that was my next alternative. It says piano, I’m going like this [wave his arms up and down in the air].

With a quick segue back to playing, the baritones replay this section and demonstrate that the dynamic problem is fixed.

The first point I wish to emphasize from this excerpt is that the information transfer breaks down if the musicians are unaware or cannot interpret these hand motions. Philip’s attempts to quiet the baritones ranged from a gentle, subtle hand movement to flailing his arms in the air. If the musicians have their “head in the stands,” then they are not seeing the conductor’s motion and thus, miss his informational cues. The motions used by the conductor for different requests are personal and the musicians must become familiar with these cues over time. It is likely that, in this instance, the former applies given the baritones’ history in the band.

The other point to make is that the conductor tries to address the musicians’ misplay without stopping the band. In a previous interview, Philip explained his ultimate goal for rehearsals: “the less talking the better.” During the music-making process, the conductor communicates to the musicians without speaking through his baton patterns, facial expression, body language, etc. As Philip notes, “The more effective I’m conducting, and the more effective musicians are interpreting that conducting, changes are happening on the fly, as opposed to stopping, explaining either verbally or singing... the better that’s happening, the more you get done in a rehearsal.” Thus, musicians must be alert to the conductor’s motions in order to allow efficient rehearsals.

**Conclusion**

The results of the field work indicate that the conductor of a community band is a figure of paramount importance to the transfer and processing of information.
during a rehearsal. In the first excerpt, Philip uses his voice as a representation of the sheet music to help the musicians efficiently process the written information on the sheet music. The next example illustrates how the motions of conducting carry information about tempo and beat, and shows challenges musicians face in interpreting this information. The last example shows one conductor’s attempts to transfer information to the musicians about dynamic markings through hand motions, without stopping the rehearsal to sing or talk.

The first thread appearing in the articulation and the dynamics example is information overload. A large part of the reason why Philip has to stop the band to rehearse passages again and again is the overwhelming amount of information the musicians process. The three largest sources of information could be the visual information in the symbols on the sheet music, aural information from the musicians in their section and other sections, and motion-based information from the conductor. Amateur musicians process these forms of information slower than professional musicians. This finding is important for amateur musicians and conductors to recognize so that realistic expectations can be set for rehearsal outcomes.

The other thread appearing in the articulation and the dynamics example is the influence of working under tight deadlines. The band’s executive sets the dates of the concerts each year, leaving 6-8 rehearsals to prepare. As a result, information must flow effectively and efficiently during the rehearsal. If the band was not working towards a concert performance at each rehearsal, the need for information to travel quickly would change; the band could learn their music at a slower pace. The implication of this finding emphasizes the need for musicians to give their full attention to the conductor during each rehearsal.

The last thread appearing in this environment is teamwork. Philip and the band’s musicians comprise a team because they rely on each other to send and receive information and perform the music accurately for their own benefit, as well as the audience’s. This guiding value underlies the purpose of this organization and directs how information flows.

Other opportunities to explore information in community concert bands were recognized during this study but not explored given the scope of this paper. Future studies might consider looking at the use formal and informal music language in the rehearsal environment, document annotations in musicians’ sheet music, and how information travels within an instrument section.

References


