Invited Article: 
Conductors and Orchestras

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From the Bassoon Editor: From time to time, IDRS invites various people from across our musical spectrum to contribute an article for The Double Reed. Three years ago, when I asked noted American composer and bassoonist John Steinmetz to participate in this series, John expressed his interest but also admitted to not being sure what to write. And as both of our schedules were quite hectic at that time, the project was mutually put on the back burner with the hope of revisiting it someday. Imagine my delight, then, to open my email this June to find a message from John Steinmetz—with a beautiful, thoughtful, and passionate article attached. We do hope that John’s writing provides food for thought—both within our double reed community and throughout the larger musical world. And we (both John and IDRS) would love to hear from others about how such conversations can move forward and begin to benefit musicians everywhere.

He who strives to be of use in this world soon burdens the people with his own insufficiency.

—Lao Tzu

After several decades of orchestral playing, I have come to believe that the power relations between players and conductors often prevent orchestras from reaching their potential. Conductors have too much power, and that power too often hampers players, orchestra organizations, and conductors themselves. The culture of communication in orchestras tends to allow musical and interpersonal problems to fester. To make matters worse, conductors generally receive little or no supervision; their superiors are non-musicians who cannot assess a conductor’s effectiveness.

Despite investing considerable energy in coping with these problems, orchestras don’t discuss them much. I want to encourage discussion so that orchestras can search for solutions. My purpose here is to stimulate conversation.

It Can’t Be
For a long time I resisted these notions, partly under the spell of inspiring conductors who used their power beautifully to create electrifying performances. Whenever I
experienced problematic conducting, I thought of it as an anomaly, a failure of training or temperament. I spent far too much time fuming about conducting that ought to be more helpful, instead of accepting reality: the average level of conducting is not very high. I was very slow to notice that unskillful conducting was caused partly by conductors’ excessive power.

In unconducted ensembles I saw what could go wrong without strong leadership, so I assumed that centralized power was necessary for orchestras, unavoidable. How else can an orchestra coordinate dozens of people, with their differing musical instincts and contrasting personalities? How else can a large ensemble produce a coherent performance, let alone a riveting one? A powerful conductor seemed like the only solution.

Now, I am rethinking that assumption.

Roadmap
The rest of this article is in two parts. Part I (The Trouble with Power) describes many power-related problems. Part II (Building a New Model) speculates about ways to face the situation.

To demonstrate the negative effects of too much power, I will describe some ineffectual conducting, but my purpose is not to attack maestros. I want to show how orchestra culture holds back conductors as well as players from reaching their artistic goals. If you are a board member or other non-musician, you may not have heard about the problems. If you are a musician, you may not realize that the problems are part of a pattern. If you already know enough about these issues, you can skip to Part II.

I hope this information fosters conversation among musicians, board members, and staff about how to help conductors maximize their effectiveness, and about how orchestras can give compelling concerts no matter who is conducting.

During the years of its gestation, this article greatly benefited from ideas, encouragement, and concerns shared by orchestral colleagues in multiple cities. I am grateful for their help and advice, and especially thankful to The Double Reed’s Co-Editor Ryan Romine, and to my wife Kazi Pitelka.

I. The Trouble With Power

Looking back now, I can remember early evidence of power causing trouble. One of my college teachers,1 a successful touring maestro and symphony music director, was charming, friendly, and supportive in the hallway, but when he ascended the podium and grasped his baton, he changed character. He started whining. He picked on certain players. He created a dispiriting, negative atmosphere. A non-musician friend told me
after watching a rehearsal from the auditorium, “I couldn’t hear what the conductor was saying, but every time he spoke, half of the orchestra slumped and the other half bristled.” At another rehearsal the same conductor, having whined and grimaced at his players for some time, threw down his baton and complained, “I don’t know what’s wrong with you people! I’m just trying to make beautiful music!”

Until that moment I had assumed that his negative behavior was intentional. Suddenly I realized that he had no idea how he affected the orchestra. He thought he was being positive. The gap between his intentions and his impact was huge, and he could not see it. I remember being frightened by this dramatic example of the human capacity for blindness.

All of us human beings have gaps in our self-perception. If we’re lucky, somebody or something will challenge our blindness so that we can outgrow it, or at least become aware. But nobody told this conductor about his blind spot, because that is not done; players do not speak to a maestro about his shortcomings or perceptual lacunae. He was in many ways a generous man, but his powerful position blocked input that might have helped him implement his good intentions.

At the time, I did not understand power’s influence, so for many years I thought of his shortcomings as personal failings. Now I see them as unfortunate side effects of too much power. This conductor’s situation strikes me, now, as a tragedy. And this sort of tragedy is all too common.

**Dangers of Power**

Decades later, I learned about scientific studies of power’s effects on human behavior. According to Robert Sutton, Stanford professor of management science,

“A huge body of research—hundreds of studies—shows that when people are put in positions of power, they start talking more, taking what they want for themselves, ignoring what other people say or want, ignoring how less powerful people react to their behavior, acting more rudely, and generally treating any situation or person as a means for satisfying their own needs—and that being put in positions of power blinds them to the fact that they are acting like jerks.”

“Power Causes Brain Damage,” an article in *The Atlantic*, discusses research on power’s behavioral and cognitive effects and its physiological impact on the brain. One of the researchers is UC Berkeley psychology professor Dacher Keltner.
Subjects under the influence of power, he found in studies spanning two decades, acted as if they had suffered a traumatic brain injury—becoming more impulsive, less risk-aware, and, crucially, less adept at seeing things from other people’s point of view.

Another scientist, neurologist David Owen, studies an acquired personality disorder that he believes should be recognized by the medical literature:

“Hubris syndrome,” as he and a co-author, Jonathan Davidson, defined it in a 2009 article published in *Brain*, “is a disorder of the possession of power, particularly power which has been associated with overwhelming success, held for a period of years and with minimal constraint on the leader.” Its 14 clinical features include: manifest contempt for others, loss of contact with reality, restless or reckless actions, and displays of incompetence.

It appears that conductors’ power can distort their perceptions and behavior. Conductors do the best they can, but their power may reduce their effectiveness; no wonder there’s often trouble. The main trouble is well known, and musicians often complain about it (although never in public): instead of helping orchestras to do their best, many conductors make the players’ jobs harder. When the maestro’s baton technique makes it impossible for the orchestra to play together, when his countenance drains life from the music, or when his suggestions make the music sound worse, an orchestra has to struggle against the conductor’s influence.

This problem is so ordinary that some musicians snort when others complain about it. “That’s how it is; get over it. We can’t do anything about it.” For a long time I grudgingly agreed, but slowly my mind has changed. Now I think that we, the orchestra field, can do something about it.

**Centralized Power**

In its musical work, an orchestra is like a holdover from feudal times: a strict hierarchy with a powerful leader at the top, reigning over nobility (principals) and commoners (section players). As in any monarchy or dictatorship, the organization’s image and personality are dominated by the name, picture, and personality of the Dear Leader, whose portrait looms over the orchestra’s publicity. In some cities, huge conductor photos hang from streetlamps and concert hall facades.

That conductor’s taste and artistic vision set the tone and direction for the organization. Whether he (it is usually a he) wields power graciously, tyrannically, or cluelessly,
his mood and personality color rehearsals. Unless he breaks a law or contractual rule, nobody supervises his musical work or his personal way of explaining, gesturing, performing, organizing rehearsals, and so on. An unwritten rule bans questioning the conductor’s choices or personal style. (Musicians do tell stories about players challenging conductors, and these tales fascinate partly because they are so rare.) Sometimes a concertmaster or other player can speak with the conductor about a musical choice or rehearsal strategy, but generally this must be done privately, with great care not to overstep boundaries of authority.

Even guest conductors wield extraordinary power over orchestras, managing rehearsal in their own ways, setting the tone for the work relationship, taking charge of interpretation, and instructing players. Nobody oversees this work, except to make sure that breaks happen on schedule. (Players’ responses on conductor evaluation forms may influence future hiring, but they do not affect the conductor’s current behavior.)

Conductors’ power can distort their perceptions and behavior, while also insulating them from important feedback. Lack of supervision isolates the conductor still further. Combining too much power with too little feedback causes trouble of various kinds.

**Musical Issues**

Nobody’s perfect. We players have to bring our musical and personal shortcomings at least somewhat under control in order to interact with colleagues and to incorporate corrections and criticisms from higher-ups. Conductors may endure public criticism from journalists and listeners, but their power prevents them from receiving criticisms and suggestions from their orchestras. As a result, conductors’ weaknesses may persist, interfering with their work. A conductor may be quite good at part of the job while remaining unaware that other parts are not going so well.

Many musical weaknesses appear in rehearsal, away from the public eye: leading unintelligibly, micromanaging phrases, wallowing in self-indulgent emotion, squelching expression, or suggesting intonation adjustments that make matters worse. Some conductors have trouble setting tempos. Many have trouble changing tempos. Some have little or nothing to offer interpretively, while others over-control. It is not unusual for a conductor making huge gestures to criticize the orchestra for playing too loudly, or for a conductor beating slowly to complain that the orchestra slows down. All too often conductors reprimand, “Watch me!” after making gestures that contradict the music.

Conductors’ failings also beset performances. Some give no cues; some give wrong cues. Many are distracting. Their beat pattern may obscure which beat is which. Some maestros drag, others rush; some beat so far ahead that they lap themselves; othersterrify you with sudden jerks, twitches, lunges, and fake-outs.
Even star conductors may have crippling musical deficits. For example, I worked extensively with three maestros who somehow attained celebrity status without learning how to give an intelligible upbeat. One of them could not, in my experience with him, lead a tempo change without having to stop and explain. Another managed to derail one of the world’s top orchestras in concert. The third led very polished, pristine performances, but he needed lots of extra rehearsals because his upbeat so rarely matched his desired tempo; the orchestra had to memorize all the tempos and ignore his preparatory beat. (It never seemed to occur to him that he might be causing the orchestra to play the wrong tempo.)

One famous conductor was persistently dissatisfied with his orchestra’s playing—he expressed his disapproval with facial expressions, body language, and words—but he was unable to convey what he wanted, no matter what communication method he used. Words, gestures, singing, and facial expressions all failed him. He rehearsed passages over and over, always radiating disappointment; then he’d move on to a different passage without saying whether anything had improved.

How can mature, successful conductors not have learned such basic skills of conducting? No doubt the reasons are complex, but my hope is that orchestras can change their culture enough to help conductors learn and practice these essentials.

Orchestral musicians, no matter what they think of the conductor, generally maintain a fierce loyalty to the music and try to play it well. In order to do that, they sometimes ignore the conductor. That not only makes it impossible for conductors to hear the effects of their gestures, but also prevents conductors’ shortcomings from becoming apparent in concerts, effectively hiding the problems from critics, audiences, and trustees.

**Personality Issues**

Research findings (mentioned above) suggest that power amplifies psychological problems. We all have our issues, but conductors, walled off from the consequences of their actions, have fewer opportunities to face them, so their issues may swell. Conductors are notorious for outsized egos, big neuroses, exaggerated quirks, and thin skins. Some waste rehearsal time, pontificate, throw tantrums, or blame the orchestra for their own mistakes. Petulant glaring is not uncommon. Unfortunately, some conductors mistreat players, use individuals as scapegoats, insult employees, or otherwise demonstrate lack of self-control.

Egregious maestro misbehavior, on or off the podium, may require crisis management or a costly cleanup. One orchestra appointed players to keep a weather eye on their conductor’s tantrums; if he got too intense during a rehearsal, those guardians silently stood to signal a break. (One of those players told me how stressful it was to
make that call.) An orchestra’s budget may need to accommodate compensation for a maestro’s harassment victim, or hush money to keep indiscretions quiet. (Recently, with public accusations of conductors’ sexual misconduct, orchestras have faced criticism for concealing or ignoring the truth.)

Meanwhile, players and staff generally pretend that all is well, sustaining the illusion of the maestro’s brilliance. That pretense can take a toll on morale, performance quality, and organizational health.

Centralized power can also bring out the worst in players. Some musicians become passive, doing the minimum. Others become resentful of authority figures, even hostile. A kind of childishness can take over, with the conductor in the parent role and some players acting like kids: selfish, complaining, ungrateful, inattentive, irresponsible. A dangerous atmosphere can develop, of mistrust toward leaders and even toward colleagues.

Principal players may also suffer from the effects of their own power, losing touch with the impact of their playing and interactions. Other players may feel powerless and may become disaffected or cynical. Relationships within the orchestra may suffer strain over contrasting responses to power, or through competition for the maestro’s attention.

The important factor here is the situation, not the individual conductors and players who are victims of that situation. Although nobody intends this result, too often the structure of authority obstructs orchestras instead of empowering them.

Of course there are wonderful conductors who inspire orchestras and enable them to play transcendently, and there are conductors who seem undamaged by their power. For a handful of conductors, the conventional power structure seems to work. But it does not make sense to maintain the same power structure for all conductors.

Administrative Issues

Usually an orchestra has a Music Director in charge of its musical life, even if others also conduct that orchestra. Perhaps it sounds like a good idea for one person’s taste to guide an orchestra artistically—to determine its personnel, its programming, and its overall artistic character—so that the music will bear somebody’s personal stamp. Unfortunately, putting one person in control can lead to unintended consequences.

A Music Director’s authority to hire and fire players can harm an orchestra’s music-making by focusing players more on avoiding mistakes than creating meaningful performances. Personnel decisions offer so much potential for abuse of power—favoritism, nepotism, quirks of taste, personal animus, political machinations—that many orchestras maintain procedures to protect the ensemble and the organization. Wouldn’t it be better not to give one person so much power in the first place?
Putting one person in charge of programming denies players a say in the music they will play. Their involvement and enthusiasm may suffer, and their huge reservoir of musical expertise, a tremendous resource, goes unused by the organization.

Giving one person responsibility for an orchestra’s artistic profile works only with those few conductors who are exceptional artists. The others might be more successful if their orchestras function more collaboratively, activating the wisdom, taste, and artistry of the players.

Without a Net
I am sure that conductors receive little or no help coping with the negative effects of holding power, and little or no training for interactions with musicians and staff. I once asked a young conductor, recently out of school, how much of her training had been devoted to interpersonal relations—to working with the human beings in an orchestra. “None,” she said. “It was all about score study.”

It is not conductors’ fault if our profession fails to give them decent preparation for positions of power. Nor is it their fault that their power undermines their ability to carry out their tasks.

It is everybody’s fault that we continue granting conductors too much power. It is our field’s fault that conductors don’t receive the supervision, feedback, and support that every professional deserves.

Hurting the Brand
Orchestras often publicize themselves by marketing the conductor, but that can obscure the ensemble’s own story and conceal its value. In the end, glorifying the conductor may damage an orchestra’s brand. Even though players create an orchestra’s sound and personality, listeners may assume that all results spring from the hand of the maestro; critics can make the same mistake. It does not serve orchestras to mislead the public about how their music gets made.

Insiders may be misled, too. During recent lockouts, it was disturbing to watch orchestra boards, who should know better, proposing steep cuts to orchestra pay, assuming that a cheaper orchestra of less experienced players would sound just as good as an ensemble that had been maturing for decades. This grave error may have resulted partly from over-promoting conductors.

Why Authoritarianism?
Although early orchestras did not necessarily have conductors (a member might lead while playing), large-scale symphony orchestras arose amid monarchies, and they
flourished when domineering Captains of Industry controlled economic life. It must have seemed natural for orchestras to have all-powerful conductors.

Much of the orchestral repertoire celebrates the myth of the heroic individual who leads the way to victory or transcendence. Many symphonies and tone poems are understood to depict the exploits of such a person, and the composers and conductors involved are seen as kindred spirits. The history of classical music, as conventionally taught, celebrates a pantheon of artist-heroes. Perhaps a yearning for heroic figures keeps our field enthralled by the vision of a conductor leading the way to glory (Newsweek headlined a story, “How Maestro Dudamel is Saving Classical Music”), but like all myths, hero stories cause trouble when applied too literally.

Another reason for the field’s reliance on conductors is that they do so much work to keep orchestras alive. The maestro’s ambition can fuel organizational development. Conductors solicit support, appear as the organization’s face in the community, and select programming and guest artists. Players like me benefit from the work that conductors do to create events and develop organizations. Sometimes the conductor is the organization, booking the hall, handling publicity, selling tickets, setting up chairs, and so on.

Although it should be obvious that a person’s ambition, fundraising skills, and promotional moxie are not qualifications for wielding vast musical authority, our field permits people to stand on podiums and wave batons simply because they have organizational abilities, or because they raised enough money to hire the orchestra. Instead of leaving those conductors alone and unsupervised with their orchestras, perhaps the field can develop practices that support conductors’ development.

**Why Orchestras Need Conductors**

The very best conductors shape a performance, clarify its character, draw out its soulfulness, and collaborate with the orchestra to bring the music to life. By making concerts more exciting, more expressive, and more extraordinary, an excellent conductor can make an orchestra more valuable in its community.

In addition, using a conductor can save money. While it is possible for an orchestra to play without a conductor (Orpheus Chamber Orchestra built a major career without conductors), using one can reduce preparation time. This reduces costs.

Conductors generally oversee musical quality, and Music Directors have responsibility for the long-term quality of their orchestras, so they are involved with personnel, guest artists, repertoire, and other issues that impact quality.

For all these reasons—increasing value, reducing costs, and overseeing quality—orchestras spend lots of money on conductors. But because of power’s negative effects, too often a conductor obstructs instead of inspires, wastes time and money instead of
saving it, or harms quality instead of nurturing it. Orchestras may not be getting what they paid for.

II. Building A New Model

I suspect that some—perhaps many—conductors could become much more effective if their power did not isolate them, if their best qualities received support, and if their personal and musical growth were organizational priorities.

I suspect that orchestras could find better ways to operate in order to reap maximum benefit from whomever is conducting, to reduce collateral damage from conductors’ shortcomings, and to foster better music-making from everybody.

Instead of pretending that power-related problems do not exist, organizations could acknowledge and deal with them. Instead of giving conductors power without supervision, orchestras could implement oversight to help conductors improve their skills. Instead of placing so much authority in one person’s hands, an orchestra could distribute responsibilities and foster collaboration. Instead of leaving conductor and players on their own to cope with the effects of power, an orchestra could adopt practices that help everyone deal with power gracefully.

Changing orchestra culture could benefit players, staff, and conductors. But what kind of model do we need? What could change orchestral culture?

I have only partial answers. Many of the necessary structures and practices still need to be invented. But I have a few ideas.

No one model will serve every situation. An orchestra may choose to operate without conductors, stick with the dictatorial model, or develop new kinds of player-conductor relationships. Some orchestras may ban unpleasant or negative conductors, while others may embrace them as part of the tension and struggle of art. An orchestra might grant different amounts of power to different conductors. An orchestra might give its maestro a lot of authority while maintaining an organizational culture designed to rein in hubris and mitigate power’s other negative effects.

Some orchestras might prefer a conductor who is more colleague than boss, more facilitator than leader. New-music groups show how this can work: often their conductors seem less intent on imposing their will than on helping the players succeed. Such conductors facilitate a group product instead of creating a personal statement. Rehearsals may include players’ suggestions. In some new music ensembles, members take turns conducting, so that conducting becomes a task, not an identity.
For a conductor search, it might make sense not to create a job description, but to look for an exciting musician with valuable skills, incorporate that person’s gifts into the organization, find people for other necessary tasks, and nurture everyone’s development.

Some orchestras might want to commission new pieces that, like Terry Riley’s *In C*, explore ways to create intricate music without needing a conductor.

I hope that some orchestras will discover healthy ways to communicate about musical and interpersonal problems, and to support players’ and conductors’ artistic and personal growth.

One of the most important steps will be to decide how to oversee conductors’ work. The purpose of oversight is not evaluation or faultfinding; it is to align the work with the organization’s mission and goals while maximizing conductors’ effectiveness. Regular 360-degree reviews of conductors might help. Coaching might help. Evaluation forms for orchestra members might help. But oversight must be in the hands of people who understand orchestra playing and conducting.

**Changing the Culture**

Small steps can modify the power relations in an orchestra. Some orchestras authorize players to curate programs or series. Others establish artistic committees. The journal *Harmony* reported on the productive changes that Finland’s Lahti Symphony made to work relationships. For example, regular workshops gave teams of players and staff opportunities to suggest solutions to problems; sessions for blue-sky ideas led to a new concert hall and a series of acclaimed recordings. As city employees, orchestra principals and others in leadership positions had to take leadership training alongside people from other occupations, learning together how to communicate more effectively.

Worker-owned businesses may have valuable experience in how to jointly run complex operations. Books about leadership and power may help. The literature and practices of servant-leadership may provide ideas. Writings, websites, and videos offer insights on shared decision-making, healthy communication, and organizational structures that support democratization.

The central question here is not how to deal with conductors’ shortcomings or players’ frustrations, but how to organize musical work for the best possible outcomes. To answer that question, each orchestra can define its own goals and then develop suitable organizational forms and practices.

**Potential Dangers**

As world events have shown us, removing a dictator can have catastrophic consequences. Doing away with conductors or reducing their authority leaves a power vacuum that
can too easily be filled in unhealthy and damaging ways. I am sure conductor-less orchestras have plenty of stories about such problems.

Simply redistributing responsibilities may not work, either. Sharing power does not prevent people from acting like jerks. (I have heard stories about a European player-owned orchestra that meets with its conductor for destructive maestro-bashing sessions.) It may take some experimentation to discover methods that get everybody participating from their best sides, and that nurture an atmosphere of collegiality and trust.

Human beings tend to resist change, so some orchestra members might prefer the status quo, where they know their place, their rank, and their responsibilities. Some orchestras will not reallocate power until others have proven that it can be done.

Developing new ways to work with conductors may not be easy, but I believe that orchestras will find it worth the effort. And even conductors may ultimately be grateful for liberation from power’s negative effects.

Values

The power structure in orchestras embodies values inherited from the larger culture, values that originated in the past even though many people share them today: domination of some people by others, obedience to authority, economic exploitation, inequality. Are orchestras complicit in America’s culture of inequality and domination? Of course we are. We can’t help it, because we are part of this society and we have absorbed its norms.

In order to change its power structure, an orchestra will need to consider its values. Promoting symphonic music by celebrating the image of a brilliant dictator—even if the dictator is indeed radiant—puts orchestras in the position of advocating for dictatorship. Is this what orchestras want to promote?

Our country is currently in the midst of conversations about the attractions and perils of authoritarian leadership, along with related conversations about inequality, exclusion, and powerlessness. Here and there, Americans are trying out new forms of social organization that are more genuinely democratic. It seems timely for orchestras to reconsider their working relationships and how best to distribute power and responsibilities. After all, orchestras exert influence not only through their music, but also through the images they project and the social relations they embody.

In a time of economic turmoil and rapid cultural change, in a complicated art form full of detail and rich with possible interpretations, the artists I most admire seem to stay in touch with their own values and priorities. I think artistic institutions also need ways to stay connected with their values and priorities. What values do you want your orchestra to represent? What kinds of relationships should it celebrate? What qualities should performances convey?
At the same time, orchestras need to be practical. Orchestra musicians have to align interpretation and coordinate action in real time, while keeping everybody inspired to do their best. The present approach to meeting these needs—a powerful and unsupervised conductor—too often turns out to be impractical, limiting the coherence and vitality of performances. Maybe that didn’t matter so much in the past, when classical music was one of the only entertainments available, but now orchestras need a reliably helpful leadership scheme, because they absolutely have to make their product compelling.

As a freelance bassoonist in Los Angeles, John Steinmetz played with major and minor orchestras at home, at festivals, and on tour, working with many conductors in many kinds of orchestras: tiny Bach ensembles, chamber orchestras, full symphony orchestras, Hollywood orchestras with embedded big band, sprawling post-romantic behemoths, and unique instrumentations for film scores and new music. He teaches at UCLA, and his compositions have been released on more than a dozen CDs from different labels. For more information, please visit johnsteinmetz.org.

Endnotes

1 In this essay, the conductors in anecdotes remain anonymous, because the point isn’t individual behavior but the power structure that influences it. In each story musicians will recognize behavior attributable to many conductors.

5 Portrait size as an indication of character has been a subject of study in the business world. Researchers compared the sizes of CEO portraits in corporate annual reports, and “invited security analysts . . . to rate the CEOs. The analysts rated whether each CEO had an ‘inflated sense of self that is reflected in feelings of superiority, entitlement, and a constant need for attention and admiration . . . enjoying being the center of attention, insisting upon being shown a great deal of respect, exhibitionism, and arrogance.’ The analysts’ ratings correlated almost perfectly with the
size of the CEOs’ photos.” (Adam Grant, Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success, Penguin Group (USA) Inc., page 37.)