

A discourse by George Weldon on musicians, their aims and problems, and the public, published in *The Shirburnian*, Michaelmas 1951 & Lent 1952:

CONDUCTOR: GEORGE WELDON

I must assume that some of my readers have seen the above on concert programmes!

When I was at Sherborne I distinguished myself by doing nothing in particular, except perhaps in evading a considerable number of the things I was sent to school for, in the interests of music! I am frequently asked why I took up conducting, to which I usually reply, "I was no good at anything else" – and this has a strong element of truth in it since I was never more than a competent instrumentalist! Of course, I know this conducting business all looks so easy, but it is not only a matter of beating time (which requires considerable practice in itself to acquire a good stick technique). To conduct successfully and professionally the actual mechanical process of "beating" must become second nature, and so automatic that it requires little thought in itself, apart from the more complicated rhythms of some modern music. A conductor must have an enormous knowledge of all types of music, a gift of interpretation to coincide as nearly as possible with the composer's intentions, the capability and authority to rehearse efficiently, and finally the necessary driving force to induce the victims at his disposal to follow and give of their best performance. I do not mean that a conductor must always subjugate the performers entirely to his will, since conditions vary according to the music; a further very important aspect is the art of accompanying a vocal or instrumental soloist performing with the orchestra, and, in innumerable cases, allowing a player with a solo in the orchestra considerable latitude within the framework of the conductor's ideas. There must always be "give and take", particularly in stage presentations of opera and ballet, where the conductor's job is to regulate the performance as accurately and comfortably as possible for all concerned, and not merely direct the musical traffic like a policeman on point duty!

There is also another aspect to a conductor's life if he happens to be the Musical Director as well as Conductor of an orchestra, and having recently finished an 8 years' stretch in that capacity with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, I have naturally learnt a bit about it! I originally was entrusted with the task of forming that orchestra from scratch, and had to select by auditions the best available players. Every year the personnel of an orchestra comes up for review, and in conjunction with the Committee, the Musical Director must decide in what sections changes are desirable, and how best to replace any players who have decided to move elsewhere. By no means the least of a Musical Director's worries is the selection of programmes. Rehearsal time is a permanently vexed question, as in the case of a full-time orchestra, it costs the same whether an orchestra is playing in public or rehearsing, therefore rehearsal time is dictated by the financial status of the organisation. Obviously, to expand a repertoire at the same time as improving the standard of playing means using to the utmost every available hour of rehearsal, without unduly tiring the players prior to public performances. Ideally, the main amount of rehearsal should be done at preliminary rehearsals on days preceding the concert, and on the Continent, where conditions are easier chiefly because of State or other grants, this is the invariable practice. In England, where costs are higher and in most cases grants are lower so that all orchestras, except the BBC ones, must attempt, by some means or other, to pay their way. It is easy for the uninitiated to criticise both the selection and performance of works played, without being fully conversant with the true facts, and this remark holds good for both members of the audience and professional critics alike. I personally feel that a critic's main function is to criticise the performances of the works played, rather than discuss what *should* have been played! We all know what works we want to hear (and thank goodness we are not all made the same) but it must be presumed that the committees appointed to compile programmes have some considerable knowledge of how to serve the public best. One cannot please all the public all the time, and one is forced to please some of the public most of the time.

Next, may I discuss that only partially-understood factor, audience reaction. Without an audience, orchestral music, as we know it today could not exist. The problem that confronts the concert organiser, therefore, is to lead the public gently and unobtrusively into an ever-wider listening repertoire, neither leaving it static, nor scaring it out of the concert hall altogether. Undoubtedly, the average concert-goer "likes what he knows", and will go and hear some of the same works apparently quite ad infinitum, passing

by anything new because he isn't quite sure in advance that he will enjoy it. In fact he gets a lasting pleasure from hearing the same music again and again, and will not frequently or willingly explore new musical territory. The public's appetite for such composers as Tchaikovsky and Beethoven, for instance, show no sign of abating at present, or for that matter any music connected with the Ballet, or made popular as incidental music for films. Yet that same person would not read the same book a hundred times, or see the same film at every cinema within reach, or go to the same play every time he visits London! Some people will follow a certain composer, others their favourite executants, as they would a film star – but only up to a point. The film star's admirers will go to every film in which that star appears, whereas the concert artist's public is apt to drop off ungratefully if a well-known work is abandoned in favour of a less-known work. Music certainly requires a more conscious concentration during the relatively brief duration of a concert, whereas a book for instance is a more relaxed concentration to be taken in doses, as and when required! All musicians are always keen to enlarge and vary their repertoires, and will do so to the farthest extent that the audience permits. But the expense of producing a large-scale new work is considerable, particularly if it is orchestral, and if, as is so often the case, this expense leads to a poor house instead of a full one, then producing new music become thoroughly uneconomic. That is why musicians all over the world are perpetually trying to persuade the public to come and at least try to listen to something new to them.

This vexed question of new music exists in most countries (not only England), and one discovers this to be the truth when visiting other countries, and comparing notes with their musicians. After all, *all* music was new once, even the tunes that everyone knows and takes for granted now, but all the same, most of the tunes in that category are supreme in their own fields, or else they would have not retained their popularity from generation to generation.

Unfortunately, the ordinary person does not concern himself with a standard of performance, as does the trained musician, and is frequently content to hear his favourite works without having the technical knowledge to assess niceties of performance. If a work ends very loudly it is more readily acceptable (a notable exception being Tchaikovsky's Pathetic Symphony), and many works which end quietly (such as Brahms' 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony) have less public appeal on that account; absurd, but true! But all performers have a musical conscience and are usually the best judges of their own performance. I find gramophone recording particularly interesting on that account especially now that everything is recorded on tape and the finished results can be played back immediately. The technique of recording is of course a totally different thing since one can go on recording the same piece of music until one is satisfied with the result. Gramophone recording is done in short sections (a 12 inch record can take just under 5 minutes music), and for disc recording each side is usually done separately. With long-playing records the same is the case, but the length of each non-stop section for recording can be predetermined, and joined together by the technicians afterwards. I have done a considerable amount of recording and I always find it the best possible form of self-criticism, since it is the only way that one can hear what one's performances sound like to other people!

A word about foreign orchestras. I am frequently asked how I rehearse them, and being no great linguist I certainly wondered myself until I did it! Basically of course a competent interpreter is used, but with what smattering of various languages one has one can get an awfully long way without one, employing also to the full one's vocal capacities and much gesticulation! Rehearsal numbers and letters are usually easy enough in most standard languages, but beyond that it becomes quite complicated, yet one always finds someone who speaks English and a surprising number of foreign orchestral musicians who understand it. I have visited many countries, including Germany, Belgium, France, Algiers, Holland, Norway, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Turkey, and managed in all of them. In places like Norway nearly everyone speaks English, but in Yugoslavia for instance, there are three different language sectors, so that what one has picked up in one place is of less value when moving to another town! Turkish is almost impossible, and although I have been there twice, I remember very little except the delightful sequence of 1, 2, 3, 4 (Bir, İki, Üç, Dört, pronounced Beer, İcki, Ouch, Dirt!)

I will conclude by saying I was asked to write an article on Music, but this seems to be more a discourse on Musicians, their aims and problems and the Public! I crave your indulgence, but a formal article on Music would, I assure you, be even less readable!

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