

Guest Conductors and Choir Collaborations: Reflections from Jonathan Willcocks

Andrew Sutherland¹

Abstract

The use of a guest conductor for large-scale, collaborative choral works is a common practice. It allows fresh insight into the performance of a work into which the guest conductor may have unique or expert insight. Working with a guest conductor can allow a fresh perspective for choristers and allow for the exchange of musical and pedagogical practices for the regular conductor. Such exchanges are not always successful, however, and egotism on the part of musical leaders can provide for tense situations which is harmful to the musical process. Jonathan Willcocks has emic and etic perspectives of numerous international and large-scale collaborative performances and reflects on projects that were enjoyable and in some cases problematic. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Jonathan's reflections are explored to understand the manifestation of factors when a guest conductor is engaged for a performance. Implications for positive use of a guest conductor are discussed and recommendations made for efficacious interaction.

Keywords:

choral music, collaboration, guest conductor, interpretative phenomenological analysis, egotism.

¹ Monash University, Wellington Rd, Clayton VIC 3800, Australia

Corresponding author:

Andrew Sutherland, Wellington Rd, Clayton VIC 3800, Australia

asutherland76@hotmail.com

Choirs involved in collaborative projects such as festivals and multi-choral works frequently engage guest conductors to guide the assembled ensemble. An ensemble will usually experience two conductors during the process; the regular conductor who will help the singers learn the music, and the guest conductor who will typically take over the leadership of the choir for the final rehearsals and performance (Freer, 2007). The guest conductor can bring fresh insight into the music being rehearsed and provide the regular conductor with new pedagogical perspectives (Lanier, 2007; Glosser, 2005). While the process can inject fresh enthusiasm and energy into the activities of a music ensemble, it is not always positive or successful (Khodyakov, 2014). Difficulties can arise when the conductors have different interpretations of the music and resulting tension can manifest in the singers' performance and affect their experience of the project. Issues of territoriality and ego can influence the relationship between the two conductors bringing singers into personal conflict situations (Sateren, 1982). In exploring the emic and etic experiences of the guest choral conductor, Jonathan Willcocks reflects on his experiences and the issues associated with handing an ensemble over to a guest conductor are explored.

The guest conductor

This article adds to a small body of work that addresses musical collaboration with guest conductors (Chuang, 2005; Jansson, 2015; Khodyakov, 2014; Neher, 2011; Sutherland, 2017a). The guest conductor adopts the role of the expert teacher (Hattie, 2003), imparting wisdom as well as training to the collective ensemble. Within a short time period prior to a performance, the guest conductor often encounters large groups of new people. How the guest conductor relates to an unknown group can impact the outcome of the project as "if he is not able to establish a psychological bridge to the members collaborating with him, attempts to make music will be in vain no matter how good his musicality" (Chuang, 2005, p. 2). By necessity, the guest conductor will have a different approach to the music than the choir has become used to (Neher, 2011). Changes in conducting style, musical interpretation, and communication style need to be processed and accepted in a relatively short space of time. Sensitivity to what has occurred in the rehearsals prior must be shown by the guest conductor because "The most important person in this part of the process is not the guest conductor, but the school director who prepares the students prior to the first rehearsal" (Freer, 2007, p. 32). The process of handing over a choir to a guest conductor requires an acceptance on behalf of the regular conductor that musical differences will be communicated with the ensemble and this possibility needs to be expressed and accepted by the group to enable an acceptance of change (Marroquin Velasquez, 2011).

Encountering fresh perspectives from a guest conductor can be a positive process for a choir which has been working with the same conductor for a long time. Attitudes towards the choral experience can decline as complacency and familiarity with a regular conductor increases over time. Gleason asserts that, "Since attitudes decline as singers grow in expe-

rience with a conductor, it is recommended that directors continue monitoring attitudes, challenging singers, and striving to be sensitive to musical and emotional needs of singers” (Gleason, 1992, p. 105). Providing a renewed viewpoint for choristers can be achieved through the use of a guest conductor or by participating in a collaborative event with other choirs (Sutherland, 2015). Singers anticipate the effect good leadership can have on their vocal contribution. They are excited by it, and the conductor may reinforce or destroy their expectations. (Jansson, 2015). Good leadership in a music-making context can directly impact the sound made by the ensemble.

Egotism and musical leadership

The Ego concerns the view of oneself, as defined in the second layer of Freud’s structural model of the psyche (Swart, 2016). By the age of eight, the ego is largely formed and is developed over time with deep, personal memories and experience. Each ego is therefore unique as it consists of genetic makeup and experience (Rajvanshi, 2012). Egotism can present itself as a desire to enhance favourable views of oneself and often provides an over-inflated estimation of one’s personal features (Federn, 1952). The egotist has tendencies to centralise the concept of ‘me’ and relegates concerns for others (Ostercamp, 2009).

In the process of mastering music, having a strong ego can be an asset. One view is that high-achieving musicians “are not conceited because they are gifted. On the contrary, they sing well (or play well) because they have strong egos” (Vennard, 1997, p. 25). Musicians can therefore be encouraged to develop their ego which can develop into egotism (Dhiman, 2017). Musical leaders working with teams of people, however, are not afforded the luxury of centralising the ‘me’ concept over consideration for others (Bryson, 2016). Ensembles need to be motivated and two types of motivational climate are: task-involving orientation and ego-involving orientation. Individuals with a task-involving orientation measure their performance by personal development and mastery. Individuals with an ego-orientation gauge their achievement in relation to the performance of others. In group motivation, ego-involvement is linked to greater reported pressure and tension, whereas task involvement provides positive motivation. Musicians who experience a task-oriented climate are more likely to perceive their conductors as supportive. (Matthews & Kitsantas, 2007).

The self-concept or self-identity is a personal construct that is formed by the narrative of one’s own life experiences. Our self-identity is meaningful to ourselves and when our self-esteem is threatened in any way, defensive behaviour is triggered as an automatic response. For musical leaders, an important aspect of self-concept in the psyche is with “Interpersonal relationships in which the individual is feeling threatened, he/she may respond defensively” (Sharlow, 2006, p. 15). Defensive behaviour refers to interaction that serves to protect the self from perceived attack by deflecting responsibility or blame and can incite reactionary defensive behaviour in others (Lannin, Bittner, & Lorenz, 2013). This negative engagement can detract from meaningful music-making and adversely impact the enjoyment of the members of the ensemble. Keene poses this question for conductors, “If you are con-

templating a career as a conductor, you first must examine your motives. Do you seek this vocation out of a genuine and total love for music, or out of a wish for ego gratification?” (Keene, 1982, p. 48). English conductor, Sir Colin Davis noted a prevalence of egotism in the music industry, stating, “Certainly less ego would be welcome, and more attention to problems that are actually concerned with the music” (Hall, 2001, p. 40). Leonard Van Camp, American choral conductor also posits, “A conductor cannot allow his ego to get in the way of music making” (Freer & Buske, 2012, p. 40). Alternatively, an effective conductor will have purposefulness beyond classic goal-orientated leadership. Jansson (2013) discusses sensemaking being the cornerstone of musical leadership; congruently mastering the self and the present situation for the benefit of mankind. Sensemaking when leading socially productive musical projects forms the antithesis of egotism.

Methodology

Background

Jonathan Willcocks has spent many years conducting collaborative performances involving numerous ensembles, mainly choirs, around the world. He graduated from Cambridge University where he had a choral scholarship at Trinity College and spent ten years as Director of the Junior Academy at the Royal Academy of Music in London. He is the conductor of several community choirs and orchestras in the United Kingdom and travels internationally as a guest conductor. From the age of eight to thirteen he was a chorister at Kings College, Cambridge under the direction of his father, Sir David Willcocks and recalls one of the earliest performances of Britten’s *War Requiem* as a pivotal moment in his passion for large-scale, collaborative projects. Some of his work as a guest conductor leads to commissions for choral works which has enabled him to compose frequently. I met Willcocks at a choral festival in Leipzig and subsequently invited him to be guest conductor for a collaborative performance project in Perth, Australia, involving around ten schools which he did twice. My personal knowledge of Willcocks’s collaborative choral work provides a suitable level of researcher understanding that is appropriate for the chosen methodology. The role of a guest conductor in musical collaboration has attracted little research attention and more needs to be understood about how they can impact the lived experience of performing musicians.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The methodology used for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA draws upon the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Phenomenology is used in social science research to observe the world according to the lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017). According to Husserl, the natural function of reflecting on, seeing, thinking, remembering and wishing is the basis for phenomenology (Husserl, 1931). Hermeneutics is the theory and

methodology of interpretation. Jonathan A. Smith, who developed IPA, discusses the early work of Schleiermacher who wrote systematically about hermeneutics as a generic form. Schleiermacher suggests that interpretation can be grammatical and psychological. Grammatical interpretation requires exact and objective meaning to text whereas psychological interpretation acknowledges the individuality of the participant (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In IPA, a double hermeneutic is required whereby the participant is making sense of their own life and then the researcher makes sense of the participant's understanding. IPA is idiographic, inductive and interrogative (Taylor, 2015). The idiographic component of IPA concerns a phenomenon in a specific context rather than general or universal. It aims at "generating rich and detailed descriptions of how individuals experience phenomena under investigation" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 9). This idiographic commitment is unusual among qualitative methodologies. Nomothetic principles which underpin much empirical work in psychology rely on establishing probability that phenomena will occur under certain conditions. IPA is best suited to this study to understand in detail, a particular experience of an individual subject and conclusions are made without assuming a universal understanding of the phenomenon.

The orientation of IPA is cognitive and aims to dialogue with mainstream psychology, setting it apart from discursive psychology which seeks to deconstruct core cognitive constructs. As such, IPA was chosen for this article in order to find meaning in the life experiences of the participant as he understands them, rather than seeking to understand his psychological orientation.

Employing IPA is appropriate as it "emphasizes that research is a dynamic process in which the researcher takes an active role as they try to approach the participant's personal world" (Southcott, 2009, p. 145). A researcher's understanding of the phenomenon is required to make sense of the participant's world through a process of interpretative activity (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA allows for the researcher to be closely involved with the participant's world in order to understand it. This approach also acknowledges that there is no direct route to experience but closely experiencing the phenomenon is preferable to experiencing it from a distance (Smith, 2011).

The proposition of naturalistic inquiry prompted a demand for rigor that met the same standards demanded in the long-established scientific methods of enquiry. Credibility was introduced to parallel internal validity, transferability corresponded with external validity, dependability complemented reliability and confirmability is congruent with objectivity. In discussing the role validity of Arts research, Eisner (2005) argues, "Validity in the arts is the product of the persuasiveness of a personal vision; its utility is determined by the extent to which it informs" (p. 70). His position allows subjectivity to have meaning and value and should not be considered less valid than a more quantitative, science-based method of inquiry.

Although popular in psychology research, IPA is increasingly being used to understand how people engage with music. Sansom (2005) acknowledges the usefulness of IPA to

better understand meaning in musical improvisation. Pothoulaki, MacDonald and Flowers (2012) investigated how music therapy assisted social connectivity of cancer patients. Taylor (2015) utilised IPA with his research of mature-aged amateur keyboard players and Robinson and Nigbur (2017) explored performance anxiety in undergraduate music students. Each of these studies sought to understand meaning through the lived musical experiences of individuals in a wide variety of contexts.

Epoche and bracketing

My own experience as a musician involved in numerous musical collaborations has been that the strength of the outcome often seems to rest on the force of personality of the conductor. *Epoche* is the examination of phenomena in terms of its own inherent meaning, free from bias and assumptions. It allows for empathy and connection with the subject but must be acknowledged. Throughout the process of framing the interview questions through to the analysis of the data, I returned to my *epoche* repeatedly to ensure that the interpretation was truly based on the interviewee's experiences. The process of interviewing Willcocks was informed by our previous experience working together on projects and a perception that we share similar views on the importance of personal interactions between a guest conductor and the host ensemble. I have found that projects have felt to be more successful and enjoyable when a more positive synergy between the guest conductor and participants has been evident (Sutherland, 2017a). I have also found that poor communication between the guest conductor and regular conductor can lead to problematic musical outcomes as well as an unenjoyable process (Sutherland, 2017b).

When presenting the findings, 'bracketing' was utilised. The method of bracketing is a reductive process, allowing perceptions of reality to be considered without the distraction of researcher assumptions and preconceptions. Although subjectivity frames our overall understanding, bracketing allows for focus on a specific component of the subject's world in a way that disregards bias. Bracketing was used by describing the findings of the data rather than attempting to explain or find meaning in them (Katsirikou & Lin, 2017). IPA is best served by a small, homogenous sample, in this case an individual participant, allowing for depth of understanding. The purpose of this study is to explore factors that are perceived to influence successful interactions with a guest conductor from the perspective of an experienced guest conductor.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical approval to conduct the research was given by Monash University. I contacted Willcocks by email and forwarded him a consent form which he signed. I then visited Willcocks at his home in August, 2016 and conducted a face-to-face interview which was recorded. This lasted around one and a half hours. Open-ended questions were asked to encourage rich, descriptive language such as: Can you recall your first musical experience involving two ensembles from different organisations? What is the most memorable

collaborative music project you have been involved in? What do you think makes a good collaboration between two or more music ensembles? Is the international element a factor in success or does it add complexity? I then transcribed the recorded interviews. Once the data were collected, they were analyzed. First, I created a column on the right hand side of the interview transcript. I then read the data repeatedly, noting emergent themes on the basis of repetition or emphasis (Shaw & Hiles, 2017). Strong, emergent themes were then included in the findings. Smith (2015) notes that during the first stage of analysis, the IPA researcher is “likely to comment on similarities and differences, echoes, amplifications and contradictions in what a person is saying” (p. 40). During the second phase of analysis, the initial notes are transformed into concise phrases which capture the essence of the participant’s meaning. The skill of the researcher is then to find high-level expressions that connect with and have meaning in existing theoretical frameworks. The final analysis respects the convergence of overarching themes articulated in the final phase with the individual idiosyncrasy of the participant’s voice. Apart from Willcocks, the names and identities of other individuals or identifiable associations were suppressed and pseudonyms used. Quotations from Willcocks are provided verbatim to appropriately represent his voice. The transcript of the interview was emailed to Willcocks for checking before the data were analyzed, and nothing further was added.

Findings

Three important themes emerged from the analysis of the transcript: Ego and collaboration, Gaining new perspectives, and Flexibility and adaptability. These themes arose from reflections of Willcocks’ career as a guest conductor and will be discussed in turn.

Ego and collaboration.

Willcocks feels that the psychological interaction between regular conductor, guest conductor, and choir determines the success of a musical collaboration more than musical aspects. He states, “You’ve got to have technical things, you’ve got to be on top of your brief, but how you get things out of other people is as much psychology and person management, as it is just being musically skilful.” The relationship between the choir’s regular conductor and visiting conductor is especially delicate and requires care. He notes that it would be “utterly counterproductive and wrong for anything you do to be viewed or to be able to be viewed as a criticism of what their own choral director has done in terms of preparation.” He goes on to explain the sensitivity of stepping into the role normally occupied by a choral director while they are present during the rehearsal process. He posits, “By definition anything you say which is different, some particularly school-aged children may view as a criticism of what they usually do, so I try and avoid any suggestion that I know better than their own choral director.” During this sensitive process, Willcocks feels that “So much depends on the attitude and character and approach of the leader.” He has experienced a variety of interactions with regular choral conductors and notes how important the ego of

the individual determines the success of the project. He reflects, “Sometimes it’s worked really well, sometimes it seemed like a little bit of a struggle and always looking back on it, it’s been how adaptable and how sensitive and really how ego-driven the directors are of the participating choirs.”

Vignette 1. Willcocks recalls a particular occasion when guest directing for a choir in the United States with a well-known and respected choral director. He reflects, “in hindsight it just didn’t work for him to try and hand his choir over to someone else because he was so feeling he should be doing it and that actually fed to his singers.” The reticence of the conductor to relinquish leadership of the ensemble manifested in the singers motivation to work with Willcocks. He continues, “I think they wanted to be part of this performance but perhaps how he had prepared them, they were resistant to any movement towards what I wanted in terms of subtlety.” He noticed the resistant behaviour of the choristers as, “that particular person in all of the rehearsals came and sat almost behind me almost as if they were relating to that particular director. You could see the singers with their eyes constantly on them, on that person.”

Willcocks recalls the feeling of tension during the first rehearsal. He recollects being “tempted to ask him not to come to the rehearsal but I thought that’s just asking for an explosion and he might withdraw his singers but that sort of situation can be really quite difficult.” Although this awkward situation is a rare occurrence for Willcocks, he is disappointed that it took place with a relatively young and impressionable group of musicians from a university college choir. He remarks, “When you’ve got singers there who are undergraduate singers in the chorus, 17 – 21, they were hugely influenced by how he behaved really.” He continues, “It was just down to the personality of their choral director who was a relatively young man, about 30-33, something like that who wanted to impinge his own presence on the occasion when actually it wasn’t really appropriate.” Although Willcocks normally enjoys the regular musical director to attend his rehearsals, in this case the director, “wanted to be in the limelight himself I think, that was the problem. It was more about his ego than about the choir.”

The piece being rehearsed was one of Willcocks’s compositions which made the uncomfortable situation, “particularly galling because he reckoned he knew how it should go, but on this particular occasion I was conducting as well and on that particular occasion, my view of how it goes was more important than his.” This situation whereby the regular conductor seems to undermine the composer and the guest conductor with his musicians suggests an exhibition of egotism that is harmful to the musical process. The response of the choristers seemed to reflect a distaste for an alternative approach. He observed, “You could almost hear when I said something, it was [intake of breath over teeth] sort of stuff going on and if you’ve got singers with him being visibly like that, it wasn’t helpful.” Willcocks reflected on the situation, suggesting that he should have “perhaps bitten the bullet and taken him aside when it was obvious that he wasn’t comfortable,” saying, “I’m awfully sorry but if you don’t feel comfortable I think it’s probably best that you don’t come to the

next rehearsal.” Willcocks feels that in order for a choir to be able to work successfully with a guest conductor, the regular conductor needs to “go into it with the right attitude. If as a choral director, you’re going to be so possessive of your singers and so possessive of how you think a particular piece should go...” the choir will manifest the director’s reticence to work positively.

Vignette 2. Although most of Willcocks’s experiences with guest conductors working with ensembles have been positive, he reflected on the most difficult in his career in which a visiting composer behaved inappropriately. He sets the scene, when he was “Junior Director at the Royal Academy of Music and there was a charity concert with the Symphony Orchestra there and it was in December, so we included [composer’s work] which is very popular piece for Symphony Orchestra.” Willcocks invited the composer to play the orchestral piano part thinking it would add a nice dimension to the concert. He explains, “He turned up on the day to the final rehearsal and after about ten bars he said, ‘Stop, stop, stop! That’s the wrong speed. It can’t go like that.’ A colleague of Willcocks was conducting the performance and said, ‘Alright’, and after a while there was something else wrong, ‘No, no, no, the bassoon is far too loud in that bit’ and it escalated from that.” Following around 20 minutes of rehearsal, the conductor left the rehearsal to discuss the situation with Willcocks and said, “I’ve got a real crisis here because [the composer] is interfering so much that the thing is just not going to happen.” Willcocks then returned to the rehearsal to find, “the student orchestra were all sitting there, and [the composer] was sitting there at the piano looking thunderous.” The composer then spoke to Willcocks and shared his view of the conductor as being, “completely incompetent, he doesn’t know what he’s doing. He has no idea how this piece goes. I’m going to conduct.” Furthermore, the composer stated, “Either I’m going to conduct or I’m withdrawing all the music, I’m withdrawing consent for the performance.” Not knowing whether such action was legal, but given there were 90 minutes before the performance was due to start, the decision was made that, “...if he’s so big-headed that he wants to do it, let’s put him on the podium and see what happens.” Willcocks describes the atmosphere with the student musicians as being “absolutely sullen. I was very proud of them actually. I said to them, ‘[the composer] has decided he should conduct the performance and I’m sure we will be all professional in doing what he would like us to do.’” Willcocks feels that the composer’s ego was such that working in a collegial manner was difficult. He states, “I’ve never performed a note of [the composer’s] music since. This was about 15 years ago and it was the worst experience of a musician behaving inappropriately.”

Vignette 3. The third vignette regarding Willcocks’s account of ego and collaboration is a positive one. When conducting a number of international choirs at an annual choral festival in Leipzig, Willcocks felt that “some choral directors and their choirs who were really there to show off. Really the collaboration bit of it was a bit of a nuisance, that’s not why they were there.” Although sometimes excellent choirs, the ego of the conductor affected the quality of the chorister’s experience. He notes, “They had prepared

their repertoire and they were in some cases very good choirs and they just wanted to perform and to be applauded and that was their motivation for being there.”

Conversely, Willcocks recounts an experience with a choir, describing them as a very good girls’ choir from the UK who were “easily the best choir there and yet their choral director couldn’t have been more modest. Obviously, she was brilliant at what she did and she said that the reason they were there was to interact with other choirs.” He continued, “They did their own programmes but why she had them to come to Leipzig was to interact with other choirs from around the world, to hear them sing and to make musical friends. The attitude which was just brilliant.” Once again, the choristers reflected the display of ego exhibited by the conductor. Willcocks observes, “You can see that they adored their choral conductor, yet she had absolutely no outward ego at all. It wasn’t her show, she was doing everything for the benefit of her singers.”

By contrast, the same year a German choir in attendance approached the festival quite differently. Willcocks explains that they were “there handing out cards, asking if anyone wanted to engage their choir for paid concerts and they were there for utterly different reasons and I don’t think that choir got anything out of it at all.” Furthermore, for the collaborative components of the festival which allowed the choirs to perform together the choir “rather reluctantly came along to the joint stuff.” Willcocks states that, “I don’t think at the end of it they got anything out of it that they wouldn’t have got just going and doing a concert somewhere.” He feels that the difference in attitude of the choirs and their experience of the festival

was down to the particular choral directors, what their agenda was, were they there for their own self-aggrandisement? “I’ve got a great choir, listen to us!” Why are we here at this festival, bringing choirs together? It’s what the singers can get out of it in terms of opening their eyes to other repertoire, to different cultures. Why travel half way across the world and then be so insular about it?

Willcocks states that, “If you get a choral director who is open-minded to what it can produce and imaginative, then they can give their singers so much. Otherwise, if it’s all ego-based, it just doesn’t work.” As a visiting conductor, he experiences conductors for whom working collaboratively is a problem, positing,

That’s really a matter of collaboration and partnership with the musical director that you’ve been working with. If the musical director who is usually working with the choir has felt threatened or somehow intimidated by this person coming in, they feel they’ve been slightly undermined by them and it hasn’t been something that has added a useful, extra dimension, then I think the residue can be negative.

The findings reveal projects in which the conductor exhibits unhelpful egotism, and the antithesis of this trait. According to Willcocks, the way in which musicians encounter musical experience can be impacted according to the manifestation of the conductor's ego throughout the process.

The vignettes provided by Willcocks provide examples of collaboration being memorable for the wrong reasons. His strong recollections of successful large-scale performances were notable for issues of egotism affecting interactions between the guest conductor and regular conductor. The modicum of literature focussed on the phenomenon of guest conductors in collaborative choral performances mostly provide instructions for how the process should work (Glosser, 2005; Freer, 2007; Ward, 2010; Khodyakov, 2014). These articles do not discuss the implications of a personality conflict rendering meaningful, positive work impossible. Also, with the exception of Khodyakov (2014), these articles are based on opinion rather than empirical research. If the process of involving a guest conductor in a performance project is to provide renewed enthusiasm and fresh insight for choristers, then how singers collectively relate to that person is critical if the activity can be considered a success. The preparedness of the guest conductor and regular conductor to bracket their respective egotism in order to focus on the musical process of the ensemble should be included in any discussion of successful musical collaboration. Musical leaders should, according to Jansson (2013), consider their personal ambitions to be secondary to the musical and social needs of the participant singers.

Gaining new perspectives.

Willcocks regards complacency when rehearsing music something to avoid with choirs. He explains, "Sometimes if it's a work that perhaps half the choir have sung before, after four or five rehearsals you're a bit too far ahead and there's a danger that they'll become a bit complacent about it." He continues, "They are very confident and yet there's another three rehearsals before the performance. If you allow it to go to the top and become stale, then it's quite difficult to lift them back up again when the performance comes." In order to provide a fresh perspective for his singers, he uses mixed seating and says to his choristers, "Right, today's rehearsal, the rules are that on either side you've got to have someone singing a completely different voice part, you can't sit next to anyone you're married to or anyone you'd like to be married to." Having a fresh perspective can challenge the singers and maintain maximum effort in rehearsals. The choristers then try "harder and those people who think, 'Oh I know this particular piece', actually find they were relying hugely on their neighbour to give them confidence of entries. It can help keep the level of intensity of the rehearsal nicely."

He reflects on having visiting conductors rehearse choirs which he normally directs, suggesting it can be "really helpful to have a fresh view because they rehearse with me on a weekly basis and someone else, provided they are capable and competent and can engage with the choir can very much help to focus things." Willcocks describes the process of the

same message being delivered by a different person as being “really annoying. When they say, ‘Oh it’s terrific, he or she did this’ and ‘I’ve been saying that every week for the last five weeks’, but the choral director very much has to have subtleties of psychology.” He further describes the impact of a fresh perspective, positing, “A guest conductor has one advantage and that is of novelty. Choirs I work with regularly know how I do things and what I’m doing but a skillful guest conductor can really engage something new.”

The opportunity to observe choir directors working provides Willcocks with fresh perspectives for his professional development. He notes, “Whenever I watch anybody else work, I pick up little things that I will incorporate into my own work, whether quite amusing warm-ups or just ways of dealing with a situation, I really enjoy watching other conductors work.” This is most valuable for him during the rehearsal process. He states that rehearsals are “where all the business is done. Performances are only the sum of the rehearsals really. I really enjoy sitting in on rehearsals, seeing how people work.” He enjoys watching other practitioners “partly because it’s really nice to see a strong engagement between a conductor and their singers but partly because I’m a magpie in terms of what I do.” This is especially useful for him if “they are rehearsing repertoire that I know intimately. Quite often I’ll see completely different ways into it.”

Willcocks values opportunities to hear other choirs in order to encounter new music. In discussing a conference of choral directors he mentions “there’s a choir coming from Estonia who will sing Latvian music and Baltic music which simply is a brave new world to us.” Cultural approaches to singing also provide fresh perspectives during opportunities for exchange. He states, “I’m really struck by the completely different music cultural identity that they bring and also just the way in which sing, the sort of tonal qualities that the different choral traditions.” Sharing choral practices can develop expectations even if the cultural practices are already common. Willcocks reflects on the series of collaborative concerts he participated with me in Australia, recalling that the choirs “had a big diversity of approaches, a big diversity of expectations, some had much more sophisticated music programmes than others and so they can gain from seeing just how high the bar can be.”

Willcocks shares his international perspective of conductors working with choirs and emphasizes that the variety of approaches and techniques are a rich source of improving personal choral pedagogy. The process of collaboration and working with different conductors, benefits musicians and conductors who are willing to give up control of their ensemble and observe others as they work.

That diametrically opposite conducting styles can be equally compelling and effective has been well established (Neher, 2011). Contrasting rehearsal structures can also yield engaging and rewarding rehearsal experiences. A popular structure is to have fast-paced activities at the beginning and end, with slower-paced activities in the middle of the rehearsal (Pascoe, 1974). Other conductors use a process of juxtaposing fast and slow-paced activities throughout the rehearsal (Decker & Herford, 1973; Lamb, 1979). Both of these approaches have been found to be effective (Cox, 1989). Working in collaborative environments such as

making use of a guest conductor allows different approaches to provide fresh perspectives for choristers. Conductors may also benefit from the opportunity of observing alternative methods. Acknowledging that one's enthusiasm requires occasional renewal can be difficult for any conductor, but doing so can allow sustained creativity if the individual is open to engaging with someone whose approach is different from their own.

Flexibility and adaptability.

The third emergent theme reflects the importance of being adaptable and flexible when involved in musical collaboration. When working with new groups of people in new environments, many unforeseen factors require flexibility and adaptability from all parties.

Vignette 4. Willcocks states, "I've had lots of experiences where I've been disappointed by the level of preparation of choirs that I have then had to work with." He recounts a project in which he was conducting a performance of *Carmina Burana* which involved school children. He explains, "the *ragazzi* chorus was being done by a local school and the musical director was someone I knew fairly well and I had no reason to believe they wouldn't do a decent job." It became clear that the children were unfamiliar with their part. He states that the children, "didn't know what they were doing and I had to in effect 'belt and braces' by getting four of the sopranos of the chorus to literally stand amongst them to sing the children's part just to get it going." Being flexible allowed the children to perform the work. He continues, "By-and-large, once they were up and running, once the phrase had started, they would sort-of catch on and sort of remember how it had gone. I think one has all the time to...the best plans always go awry." Willcocks acknowledges the importance of planning and preparation but maintains that flexibility is paramount. He posits, "You can plan a rehearsal, you know the amount of time you've got, you know what you've got to get through and you have a plan in your mind as to how you are going to approach that." He suggests, however, that "all the time you need your antennae to be telling you what the feel of a rehearsal is and sometimes you will need to scrap plan A either to have a plan B or to use your nous."

Vignette 5. Being aware of the mood of choristers is fundamental and relinquishing a plan to accommodate the group temperament which can fluctuate is recommended. Willcocks suggests for example, "it would be a really good idea to sing a really easy, upbeat movement just to raise the temperature of the rehearsal again." He feels that when working on a complex piece, this can "enable the performers so they've really achieved something special, above what they thought they could do." He provides Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* as an example of such a work. He states, "There's that challenge of getting them over what I call the credibility hump. At first it will either be completely bewildering to them or they won't be able to understand what it's about." He recalls his first time conducting the work, saying, "You may spend 15 minutes rehearsing *Burn Down their Houses*, it's really awkward and you have to do slow, detailed rehearsal and if you did that for an hour then the rehearsal will go like that [points down]." If the choir is reticent to embrace

a difficult piece, he suggests allowing the choir to “believe in the work by focussing the first couple of rehearsals on the easiest bit so in a relatively short time, they can sing a movement confidently and realise, ‘Yeah, this is going to work.’” This is most apparent with Tippett’s Oratorio in which after working hard on some complex and angular choruses, “You’ll do 10 minutes on *Steal Away* and they suddenly feel a confidence in it again.” Constantly monitoring the morale of the choir with such a work requires the conductor to be flexible and adaptable so they can “ease their way into it and then by subtle guile, you can use that as a lynch pin to remind them of the bits they can sing and then chip away at the more challenging sections.”

Willcocks feels that choristers should also adopt a flexible and adaptable approach to learning music. He considers that, “Sometimes that involves leaving them in their comfort zone, sometimes actually it’s me giving them a little jolt so that they are less complacent and just, ‘exactly how we always do it.’” He acknowledges that not all choristers are at the same level of experience and ability and the need to differentiate for a variety of musical needs in rehearsals is challenging but essential. He states, “You’re challenge as a choral conductor is to keep both ends of the spectrum equally involved.” He feels that there are often “strong singers who could do it on one or two rehearsals but you want them to come to all eight rehearsals because they form the momentum for the choir.” For Willcocks it is important “to keep them interested and involved and enjoying the rehearsals, that sort of psychological balance while not losing the lesser end of it.” More challenging is the frequent collaboration between enthusiastic amateur choir and professional orchestra. He points out, “It’s very different to working with professional musicians because professional musicians want something completely different from you, they don’t want to be entertained, they don’t want for you to fill the time.” He continues, “they want you to come well-prepared, not to waste time and to rehearse effectively. If you’ve done what needs to be done in an hour and a half rather than two hours, fine, great, off we go home early.” By contrast, he claims that with amateur choristers if there are two hours of rehearsal scheduled and, “if after an hour and a half you say, ‘I think we’ve done enough, you can go home now’, they’d be outraged. Because they’ve come here to sing, they want two hours’ worth of rehearsal.” Somehow a balance must be achieved where everyone enjoys the rehearsal process whereby,

You’ve got business to be done, you’ve got to be efficient to enable the professional musicians to get on top of everything you’re asking them to do and very often on the minimal rehearsal while you’ve also got to motivate and to inspire and to engage with the amateurs involved in a very different way and that’s the real challenge.

The unique situation of collaboration with a guest conductor, particularly when ensemble collaboration occurs, provides many factors which are different from previous performance projects and applying the same musical and administrative formula will not

always work. By maintaining a flexible and adaptable approach, when collaborating with other musical directors Willcocks has enjoyed a long career including many large-scale musical collaborations. He has benefited from the fresh perspectives of both egotistical and humble directors in the process.

The nature of collaborative projects is that the participants are unfamiliar with each other. There is often little time for a guest conductor to come to terms with what needs to happen musically and otherwise prior to the performance. Although much has been written on the importance of planning a meaningful choir rehearsal (Phillips & Cicciarella, 2005; Gorelick, 2001), planning for the unknown is compelling. Willcocks discusses the importance of visiting participant choirs during the preparation stage which is desirable; however, although this is helpful, it does not negate the possibility of unpredictable issues. Often in collaborative projects it is not just the guest conductor that provides a new element, but the venue, the combination with other singers and a change from piano to orchestral accompaniment provide factors that cannot be easily anticipated. If planning is such that it is inflexible, the ability to deal with these factors will be even more challenging. Being flexible and adaptable to the new situation that all musicians find themselves in will help enable the conductor to make logical choices when needed. Flexibility and adaptability are words well-known in the worlds of Jazz and Drama, but less familiar in literature associated with the typically formal process of large-scale choral music.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that determine successful interactions with a guest conductor. For guest conductors to engage successfully with relatively unknown groups of musicians, there must be an ability to adapt to new situations and to do so with the needs of the group in mind. With an absence of egotism, the guest conductor and the ensemble can mutually benefit from new, musical collaborations. Future phenomenological research could include emic and etic perspectives of musicians and guest conductors involved in a single project.

My personal reflections on the themes raised in this study are informed by projects involving a guest conductor that were entirely positive, and others that were difficult and problematic. In cases where the latter prevailed, the guest conductor exhibited the type of ego-centric behaviour reflected in Willcocks's encounters. The use of IPA in this study, allowed me to draw connections with my experiences of problematic and successful relationships between the regular conductor and guest conductor to understand the important themes of Willcocks's transcript for this study. Where the focus was on the musicians and their engagement with the music, the process offered much in the way of musical opportunity and development. This finding is congruent with Khodyakov (2014), who discusses the need for a guest conductor to establish a level of trust with unfamiliar musicians and that behaviours mutually effect both conductor and ensemble. The experiences of Willcocks supports the findings of Jansson (2015) who argues that the leadership style of the conduc-

tor can directly effect the musical outcome as well as the social experience of the singers.

Phenomenologists poses the question: What is the essence of experience of this phenomenon for those who experience it? (Patton, 1990). The essence of a phenomenon can be better understood through careful analysis rather than casual observation. The essence of this phenomenological study is that personality traits in musical leaders become more important when collaborations take place. Situations in which conductors becoming territorial and egocentric, leading to difficult collaborative partnerships can be pre-empted by asking the question; What is the purpose of this project involving a guest conductor? Having a shared answer to that question clearly articulated can make egotism less likely to manifest.

Sharing ideas in producing choral music is critical in keeping the art form vibrant and engaging. Making use of a guest conductor can inject new enthusiasm for all participating musicians which allows a progressive approach to developing techniques, repertoire and pedagogy. If the process of engaging with a guest conductor is to be successful, the regular conductor either needs to control any instincts towards egotism or remove themselves from the process. The guest conductor similarly needs to be open-minded for the likelihood of unknown factors presenting themselves relatively soon before the performance. The practice of allowing the maximum number of unknown factors to be encountered on the day of the final rehearsal and performance is common when access to the venue is limited. It can however lead to a stressful process which effects the enjoyment of participants and creates memorable occasions for all the wrong reasons. Conversely, limiting unknown factors while remaining flexible during the process can make best use of a guest conductor in collaborative musical events and inject fresh, new perspectives for everyone.

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