

# A Socially Constructed Individualist: An Interactionist Study of Role-Making among Orchestral Conductors

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**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the role-making of an orchestral conductor. It is framed by the symbolic interactionist perspective and focuses on Ralph Turner's role-making theory and the works of Alfred Schütz and Howard S. Becker and associates. The research project is based on grounded theory methodology. The applied techniques include semi-structured interviews, video-elicited interviews, observations of teaching conducting and opera rehearsals, video analysis, and secondary data analysis. The results reveal how the process of role-making is shaped during secondary socialization and indicate the social features of the role, such as high social prestige, awareness of the body, an exclusive social group, and teamwork. The role-making process is based on permanent interactions and negotiations with social actors: the composer and the musical score, the orchestra, soloists, ballet, and the audience. Additionally, it is influenced by cultural factors, such as the conductor's gender, age, nationality and international experience, competencies, as well as the type of professional contract. At the same time, conductors need to actively maintain the image of determined and resolute individualists, as expected by the social actors they interact with.

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**The** article focuses on the role-making of orchestral conductors as a socially constructed process. In particular, I will undertake how the individual professional role of an orchestral conductor is negotiated with other social actors, both groups and individuals, and how it is influenced by various cultural, organizational, and group-related factors.

The job of an orchestral conductor is to make a group of musicians play one consistent piece of music. As some interviewees stated, such a task may be compared to working with a group of people who simultaneously read a poem. They have the exact text in front of them. However, each person may deliver the tempo and loudness differently and give a divergent emotional interpretation of the text. The conductor's role is to make the orchestra, and other participants of the performance (e.g., ballet, soloists), perform musical notes as one, introducing particular instruments at the right moment of the musical score while delivering their interpretation of the music.

The text is based on a broader grounded theory methodology research project entitled *With Baton and Scalpel. Work Intermediated by the Body. Specialist Knowledge and Bodily Skills in the Work of Neurosurgeons and Orchestral Conductors*. The study aims to understand and describe the regularities of specialist work carried out through the body in two professions—orchestral conductors and neurosurgeons. Therefore, the main part of the research has been done among two groups whose members work together or have a close professional acquaintance with one another. The ongoing study has been conducted in Poland since 2018. In the text, I will

present the outcomes of the study on orchestral conductors concerning the social construction of their professional role and answer research questions referring to this professional group. The research questions the article answers focus on the role-making of an orchestral conductor, especially on negotiating with others, performing the leadership role, and engaging in verbal and non-verbal communication. The article's main argument is that despite its individualistic image, the social role of the conductor is shaped, negotiated, and created through social interactions with groups and individuals and with an object—the musical score, under the influence of cultural, organizational, and group-related factors. At the same time, the conductors put great effort into maintaining the image of a determined and independent leader. Although the text describes the social role of orchestral conductors, it indicates the regularities of any social role that has a more individualistic image, where charisma and leadership play an important role, and where regular tasks are both developed through the cooperation of various groups and individuals and dependent on the image of a resolute leader.

## Theoretical Background

### Symbolic Interactionism and Role Theory

I have chosen symbolic interactionism as the theoretical perspective of the research. The symbolic interactionism premise concerning human nature is that individuals act consciously, not as objects determined by impulses, social norms, roles, or biological factors. As Norman Denzin writes (1972:77), human behavior never has “real meaning,” only the one ascribed by an individual. The meanings of objects derive from social interactions—how others act towards a given subject is crucial as it defines the

object (Blumer 1969; Konecki 2005). To understand an acting subject, it is necessary to identify one's activity within the cultural context and capture its culturally defined meaning—recognize such an action through the prism of culture or the specific context in which it occurs (Blumer 1969).

The social role concept applied when analyzing the collected data refers to Ralph Turner's (2002) symbolic interactionist theory. He claims that roles exist in various levels of concreteness and consistency. However, individuals frame their behavior as if they were clearly defined and see-through. As a result, they make some aspects of the role more or less explicit, depending on the social context (Turner 2002:22).

In Turner's works, one may find negotiated, interactionally constructed processual descriptions of the social role. A social role may be constructed by different social actors in various ways, even though the tasks of the role are the same. In the case of conductors, how they play their social role is taught during secondary socialization, mainly by their professors. However, as Turner states (2002:23), in the role-making process, each role relates to other roles in a particular social situation. It cannot exist alone, without roles towards which it is oriented. Individuals are, therefore, not passive occupants of their social position with clear rules and norms ascribed. Instead, they are actors who actively navigate in the context at least partly furnished by their relationship with other social actors. The roles that have the most impact on role-making among conductors are orchestral musicians, soloists, composers, ballet dancers, and the audience.

I frequently refer to the notion of 'profession,' which I understand after Eliot Freidson (1988:71), as

a group of people performing a set of activities that provide them with the primary source of their subsistence. William Goode (1977:442) states that professions have two fundamental attributes—specialized training in a body of abstract knowledge and a collectivity or service orientation to their work (as cited in Rodgers and Thorson 2019:n.p.).

### Schütz and Becker—Two Theorists of Music

Two theorists of the sociology of music<sup>1</sup> whose works are helpful in the analysis presented in the article are Alfred Schütz, with his classical "Making Music Together" (1976), and Howard Becker, with a series of works on music as a socially negotiated phenomenon (Faulkner and Becker 2009; Becker and Pessin 2017). The authors represent two different theoretical approaches—phenomenology in the case of Schütz and symbolic interactionism in the case of Becker.

The first sociologist mentioned, Alfred Schütz, represents a phenomenological perspective on *making music*. In the article, I adopt his position to explain one aspect of the conductor's role—mediating between the composer and the orchestra to recreate a piece of music. As Schütz (1976:159) writes, the musician's role is to mediate between the composer and the listener. When one looks at it from such a perspective, the conductor's role is to mediate between the composer and the musicians. They follow the instructions given by the composer. A musical score is no more than a set of commands a musician obeys to perform the piece of music properly (Schütz 1976:163, 166). As such, it lacks interpretation. Wil-

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<sup>1</sup> The text at hand should rather be included in the domain of the sociology of interaction or the sociology of work (or, more precisely: working), as it investigates the social, group, and interactional aspects of the role of a conductor.

helm Furtwängler (as cited in Schütz 1976:166) states that musical notation does not indicate the precise volume of a *forte* or the speed of a *tempo*. Conducting is an idiosyncratic art, and composers may hold their understanding of the slowness of *adagio* (Malhotra 1981 as cited in Khodyakov 2014:67). Each is performed in accordance with the particular place and orchestra. The expression markings intentionally have only symbolic value and should be interpreted specifically by each instrument. As Schütz (1976:166) states: “an ‘ff’ for the bassoon has quite another meaning than for a trombone.”

Let us suppose that only one musician is playing a musical score. In that case, he/she ‘deciphers the hints’ of the composer and may perform their interpretation of a *forte*. When there are fifty or eighty instrumentalists, one person translates the score into sounds and communicates it to the others. That person is the conductor. Moreover, each instrumentalist has only a part of the musical score in front of him/her—the one that refers to the music played on their instrument. The conductor’s role is to make all those parts fit into place at the right moment and create one piece of musical art that is technically correct and corresponds with his/her interpretation. As Schütz writes, the musicians “tune into” each other (Segre 2020:68, 72-73). In smaller groups, this is accomplished by nonverbal communication, for example, eye contact and observation of gestures.

On the other hand, in bigger orchestras, musicians do not see all of their co-performers at all times. The conductor should enable the contact they cannot establish with each other. “The beat of the conductor’s baton” (Schütz 1976:176) also counts and measures the time passing during the performance, making it their inner time, introducing “the sharing of the on-

going flux of the musical content” (Schütz 1976:174). The sense of making music together lies in sharing a meaningful mental experience and involves permanent communication between the musicians (whether direct or mediated by the conductor) (Segre 2020:72-73).

When it comes to the works of Howard Becker and his associates, they provide a broader perspective of the symbolic interactionist viewpoint on interacting, communicating, negotiating, and role-making. Becker sees the world of music as an organized entity, a form of collective activity whose participants share experiences and interpretations (Becker 2008:160-161 as cited in Segre 2020:66). The role of any musician is negotiated, and each individual stays alert to the actions of others and adjusts their decisions and actions to what they hear and see (Faulkner and Becker 2009:185). The conductor’s role is mainly organizing the common performance by “indicating—by the length of time occupied by an upward gesture of the hand, arm, or head followed by a downward movement—the length of the beat” (Faulkner and Becker 2009:119).

Despite the differences between the phenomenological perspective represented by Alfred Schütz and Howard Becker’s symbolic interactionism, several similarities are salient for the sociological analysis of conductors’ work (Segre 2020:68). In both approaches, a critical role is played by the notions of meaning, interpretation, communication, understanding, and the definition of the situation. Their interest in music studied as a social activity focuses on performances and relationships between the musicians, performers, and the audience (Segre 2020:65). Playing, performing, and improvising music is a cooperative and negotiated activity that relies on “deeply conventionalized agreements regarding musical

roles and actions” (Faulkner and Becker 2009:122 as cited in Segre 2020:74).

It is worth noting that the conductor is a member of the world of educated musicians. Therefore, he/she owns socially derived and approved knowledge. At the same time, teachers at music schools transmit the prestige of authenticity and authority to conductors (and other musicians). That legitimizes his/her interpretation of a piece of music from the perspective of history and the biography of its author, as the conductor (or a single musician) recreates the composer’s experiences, not only the expression of his/her musical thoughts (Schütz 1976:168-170). According to the study participants, the definition of the role of the conductor has changed in the last half-century in that respect. The older definition states that the conductor should recreate what the composer wished to express with his/her ‘stream of consciousness.’ However, according to the more recent definition, the composer’s role is to interpret the musical notation and recreate what the composer wanted to say, but in a way that a contemporary audience may understand. Some of the interviewees, rather older or under the influence of an elderly professor, accomplished their work as identified by the earlier definition. Others, usually younger and in stages of a career that made them more independent from elderly professors, would align with the modern approach to the conductor’s role.

### **The Literature on Music and Conductors**

A researcher who undoubtedly made an outstanding contribution to the state of knowledge on music in the field of symbolic interactionism is Joseph Kotarba. His and his associates’ numerous works on music, such as “Rock ‘n’ Roll Music as a Timepiece” (2002), “Pop Music as a Resource for Assembling

an Authentic Self: A Phenomenological-Existential Perspective” (2009), *Understanding Society through Popular Music* (2013), and a special issue of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction: Symbolic Interactionist Takes on Music* (2016), offer a precise analysis of the links between contemporary music and social identity, the construction of self, the sense of place and time, the emergence of new musical styles, and many others. However, Kotarba focuses mainly on popular genres such as Latin, rock’n’roll, and pop; he rarely analyzes or describes more classical genres, where conductors usually work.

Other scholars whose works shed light on a symbolic interactionist analysis of music communities are Paul Berliner and Robert Owen Gardner. In his book, *Thinking in Jazz* (2004), Berliner describes individual and group learning to improvise. After a long study, also as a participant in the social world of jazz musicians, he offers not only an insider’s perspective but also the point of view of professional jazz musicians. In the book, he conceptualizes various ways in which the performers gestate their music, learn to communicate it to others, and interplay to produce one consistent piece of music.

Meanwhile, Gardner analyzes in his book *The Portable Community. Place and Displacement in Bluegrass Festival Life* (2020) and other works, data from ethnographic field research into bluegrass music culture in the American West. He describes various forms of social relations, the mobile *Gemeinschaft* community, intimacy, inclusion, and simplicity among the participants, their social relationships, and mutual support.

Much is said on various social aspects of popular music in two volumes of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*—35 (2010), edited by Norman K. Denzin, Christopher J. Schneider, Robert Owen Gardner, and

John Bryce Merrill, and 42 (2014) edited by Norman K. Denzin. Volume 35 focuses on meanings, the creative process of music-making, interactions, producing emergence, belonging, identity, and the aspects of interactions in the musical context. Volume 42, entitled *Revisiting Symbolic Interaction in Music Studies and New Interpretive Works*, offers an insight into facets such as experiencing music, cooperative activity, and the semiotics of popular music genres.

A review of the sociological literature concerning conductors reveals that sociologists are most interested in the status of women in this profession and how gender and class-related issues influence their work (Bull 2016), as well as their place in the highly hierarchical and male-dominated genre of art (Ravet 2016). Dmitry Khodyakov (2014) analyzed the relationships between guest conductors and the orchestra concerning leadership, power, and legitimization. Meanwhile, Cayenna Ponchione (2013) studied the construction of professional identity during secondary socialization, and Valerie Malhotra (1981) offered a phenomenological analysis of orchestras creating music.

Hyacinthe Ravet's *L'orchestre au travail: interactions, négociations, coopérations* is a book based on an ethnographic study conducted in France and Germany. Ravet (2015:51) proposes a concept of the "sociology of music in action" (*sociologie de la musique en action*) by which she focuses on negotiations between the conductor and other musicians in the process of preparing the interpretation. It consists of cooperation, conflict, and resistance between the social actors, as well as distancing from their interpretation, and leads to non-obvious harmony during the concert. Additionally, the author highlights the importance of non-verbal communication and the meaning of gestures in communication between the conductor and musicians.

Roy Cain (2005) contributes to the knowledge in the field with his "Singing Out and Making Community: Gay Men and Choral Singing," a chapter in a book entitled *Doing Ethnography. Studying Everyday Life* (Pawluch, Shaffir, and Miall 2005). The text is based on the author's personal experience as a chorister and focuses on the social role of choirs in constituting communities. It also analyzes the relationship between choir singing and gay identity and refers to the role of choral conductors.

Carolyn Ellis and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (2010) offer an autoethnographic point of view on conducting in *Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/ Making Music Personal*. However, it has a more personal, individual, and therapeutic dimension. Similarly, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet's "Behind the Baton: Exploring Autoethnographic Writing in a Musical Context" (2009) describes the relations between music-making, creativity, and the autoethnographic process. The text is based on her experience as a conductor.

The literature does not cover how the role of an orchestral conductor is socially constructed by negotiating with various groups and individuals and, at the same time, preserving the image of a determined and resolute individualist. And while some texts analyze the leadership aspect of the conductor's role, also concerning other social roles, mainly orchestral musicians, they rarely study other social actors—the soloists, the ballet, or the audience—as I aim to do in this article.

## Methods

A part of the research project presented in this paper is based on the study conducted among academics and conducting students and conductors associated with the Academy of Music, the Phil-

harmonic, and the Opera in a large Polish city. The research sample was chosen following the grounded theory methodology (GTM) procedure—theoretical sampling. GTM assumes that while constructing a theory, the researcher does not focus on verifying hypotheses but on comparing different cases (constant comparative method), which can, for example, be typical and atypical (Miles and Huberman 2000), to develop the properties of categories.

GTM is rooted in symbolic interactionism and indicates the processual character of social phenomena. It is an appropriate methodological perspective for research on social influences on the human body since its procedures are flexible while requiring methodological discipline. The procedures of GTM eschew the stating of preliminary hypotheses. The researcher returns to the field (where one may find the data) and analyzes the data in successive stages, formulating theses to be verified. This process is iterative, thus repeated in the course of the research. During the analysis, the data are coded, and the categories grounded therein are developed. The researcher returns to the field where they may find data, looking for new information based on the initial analysis and theoretical questions that arise until the saturation of categories is reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2007). I have chosen the constructivist version of GTM to conduct my research (Charmaz 2006; Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Bryant 2009).

In the research project, the data referring to the profession of orchestral conductors were gathered using the following techniques (as described in detail in Byczkowska 2009):

- Observation of conducting students during one semester of classes with professional orchestral conductors in the Music Academy; observation of professional conductors during rehearsals in the Opera. In total, I conducted 30 hours of observations during the part of the research concerning the work of conductors. During each observation, I held conversational interviews (Konecki 2000).
- Video-elicited (3) and semi-structured interviews (10) with orchestral conductors (4), a choir conductor (1), an assistant conductor (1), an accompanist (1),<sup>2</sup> and students (2). Some of the study participants consented to be interviewed more than once. The interviewees varied in age (between 20 and 60), length of professional practice, professional experience, and career range (local, national, and international). I conducted interviews of both kinds with nine musicians (six conductors, two conducting students, and one accompanist).
- Analysis of video materials from rehearsals and orchestral concerts.
- Secondary data analysis of a biographical interview (1), a historical book on the careers of famous conductors (1), a conducting manual (1), and TED talks on conducting (2).

The said data gathering techniques enabled me to approach the topic from various points of view, mitigating some of the disadvantages of each data collection tool. The use of numerous techniques, including those that grasp data other than narratives,

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<sup>2</sup> An accompanist is a person who plays the piano during conducting lessons and is supposed to react to the student's gestures as an orchestra would.

helped bring the embodied yet unintelligible practices and experiences to light.

The data analysis included several GTM procedures, such as coding (substantial [open and selective] and theoretical) of the gathered data (narrative, visual, audio, fieldnotes) and writing theoretical memos. I applied theoretical sampling, triangulation, constant comparative method, adopted *in vivo* codes, diagrams, axial coding, and conditional matrix (Konecki 2000; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2019).

### The Social Role of a Conductor

Becoming a conductor is a process that requires an extended period of theoretical and practical education, with the final stages taking place under the supervision of a master (see also: Goode 1977:442 as cited in Rodgers and Thorson 2019:n.p.). Musical education in Poland usually starts as early as the age of 7 or 8 in a primary music school and continues in a secondary music school. Children and teens who attend such schools learn to play musical instruments and have lessons about music theory and history. Some decide to continue their education at music academies, where they may choose various majors, such as instrumentalist, vocal, musical theory, musical composition, or music education.

Major programs in conducting are offered by some music academies in Poland. However, it is socially expected that a conductor should be a mature musician, so a conducting major is usually a second major (undertaken after completing a degree in instrumental music or music education). Usually, there are one or two, rarely three, students per year in conducting major programs. Each year has one leading professor—being the primary mentor and teacher. Conducting classes take place in a room with two

grand pianos, and one or two accompanists play music conducted by the student. The professor usually helps, comments, performs, and interrupts students during the classes. The students are allowed to lead the music academy's orchestras to learn how to work with a bigger group of musicians. To finish each semester, every student must pass an exam in front of professors, performing a few musical works prepared with the professor and one arranged individually. The final exam is based on conducting a concert.

There is a crucial division between conductors—whether they lead a choir or an orchestra. Choral conductors usually work with smaller groups (up to 50, rarely up to 80) divided into four or six voices. The voice as a musical instrument is unique and significantly different from other instruments, and the interviewees claimed that it is similar to working with four or six instruments. In turn, an orchestral conductor works with larger groups of people, broken down into the musical instruments they play. Modern symphonic orchestras may have more than one hundred instruments.<sup>3</sup> An orchestral conductor's role is to make them all perform one consistent piece of musical art. However, it is not an exclusive specialization. Members of both specializations can lead choirs, orchestras, and mixed ensembles (when both a choir and an orchestra perform a piece), although choral conductors rarely use a baton.

A conductor needs several kinds of knowledge to lead an orchestra, including theoretical and non-practical (e.g., general knowledge of music his-

<sup>3</sup> These include: 16-18 1st violins, 16 2nd violins, 12 violas, 12 cellos, 8 double basses, 4 flutes, 4 oboes, 4 clarinets, 4 bassoons, 5-8 horns, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, 1 tuba, 1 kettledrum player, 3-4 percussionists, 1-2 harps, and a keyboard player (piano, celesta, harpsichord). Retrieved September 24, 2022 (<https://theidiomaticorchestra.net/>).

tory) (Harris 2007) and theoretical-practical knowledge (e.g., the knowledge of music theory) (Stanley and Williamson 2001). These types of knowledge can be classified as *knowing that*. Another element of knowledge is *knowing how* that refers to the knowledge of how to lead an orchestra during a rehearsal and a concert. Some elements of the *knowing how* may be referred to as *tacit knowing* (Polanyi 1966)—information that the origin is unknown to us, that we are not able to verbalize, but use freely. Such knowledge is difficult to transfer as verbal communication and is insufficient to share. For instance, one can talk about “leading strongly,” but such a style of leading is undoubtedly easier to implement than to describe. Conductor training is also about teaching and acquiring skills such as “feeling the music,” that is, the ability to control the orchestra using the body (Ravet 2015). These types of knowledge are not separated and impact one another in professional practice. An individual may lose the ability to implement the practical type of knowledge, for example, when physical abilities are lost in the course of an illness, but still *know how* to use it (see also: Jakubowska 2017).

Professional conductors rely on theoretical expertise in their work. At the same time, success in the profession depends on their manual dexterity or, more generally—bodily skills and proficiency in the use of theoretical knowledge as intermediated through the body. One may be proficient in theoretical knowledge (e.g., the theory and history of music), but unable to put such knowledge into practice, thus allowing it to become part of their oeuvre, without utilizing bodily skills. The use of a baton requires high bodily awareness and many years of practice under the supervision of practicing conductors. Secondary socialization (i.e., acquiring a professional identity and acculturation of norms and

values defined by and/or for a specific social group) and education are intertwined with physical practices aimed at acquiring physical skills. Gaining bodily experience, including specific skills in bodily knowledge or somatic knowledge (“muscle memory”), is vital for this social role. Conductors use gestures and facial expressions not only to convey information regarding how the musicians are to play but also to inspire the orchestra and communicate meanings (both cultural and emotional) associated with a particular music piece.

The social role of an orchestral conductor may be characterized by the following features serving as the context they act within. First of all, conductors possess *highly specialized theoretical knowledge*. Also, they are socially connoted with expertise and treated as an elite within their professional environment. Thus, members of this professional group feel the uniqueness of their work and the exclusiveness of their profession (Freidson 1989).

Secondly, they acquire a very high *awareness of the body*, controlling even the slightest movement of the face and bodily gestures (Ravet 2015). Multiple skills need to be embodied, remembered, and pursued. During a concert, they do much intellectual work and adapt to unpredictable situations. When conducting live music, conductors work in real-time, and there is almost no possibility of correcting an error.

Thirdly, secondary socialization occurs in a rather *exclusive group*, significantly reducing any influence from outside of their professional environment. To be an excellent professional conductor, it is necessary to spend much time learning and practicing. This socialization also includes bodily habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), in line with gestures, posture, facial expressions, and clothing.

Fourthly, the conductor leads a team that is largely responsible for the *success of their common task*. Despite the high individual prestige that results from the conducting profession, success depends on teamwork. Therefore, the importance of individual work and cooperation with the team is appreciated and maintained (Schütz 1976). Charisma, allowing the conductor to manage the team during the performance, also plays an important role (Khodyakov 2014:67). Competition, negotiations, or conflicts between the orchestra (as a whole or its members) and the conductor may occur. As the interviewees state, the effects are much better if the orchestra members feel comfortable working under a conductor, believe him/her and follow his/her instructions (see also: Ravet 2015).

Fifthly, the profession is *dominated by men*.<sup>4</sup> Women have only widely entered the profession in the last two decades, and most conductors are still male. Some professors, usually elder ones, indirectly refuse to teach female students, and there is an informal rule that female professors should mainly teach women. As the interviewees stated, this is mostly due to the stereotype that women are unable to deliver a strong, powerful expression that is sometimes necessary during a concert. However, female conductors disagree with such a viewpoint as many world-famous female conductors, like Agnieszka Duczmal, Simone Young, Odaline de la Martinez, or Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, to name a few, offer excellent and strong musical interpretations.

Another interpretation is delivered by Anna Bull (2016:857), who states that this genre of music has always been produced and consumed by the middle

classes. Therefore, it reproduces middle-class values concerning the relations between musicians, including more traditional gender relations.

Negotiating the role-making of a conductor involves *various social actors*. This process includes orchestral musicians, soloists (vocal and instrumental ones), composers, the ballet, and the audience, all of whom strongly influence the actions undertaken by a conductor. In the following part, I will describe and analyze how interactions with each of the mentioned social actors have an impact on the performance of the social role of a conductor. Other social actors, such as the musical institution's administration, authorities, technical staff, choir, and director (in the case of theaters and operas), also play important roles, but I will not analyze their influence in depth due to space constraints.

### The Composer and the Musical Score

The relationship between a conductor and the work written by a composer in the score (see also: non-human actor/actant in Latour 1996:369) is dependent on whether the conductor prepares the score alone. That may be the case because the composer is no longer alive, or it is unlikely that he/she will listen to that specific performance or participate in concert preparations. Even if the conductor works with the score him/herself, the interpretation is not fully individualized (Ravet 2015). In this aspect of the role, the conductor is limited not only by the notation but also by imaginary interactions with the composer. He/she tries to deduce the composer's intentions, for example, by learning about the period when the piece was written. In addition, the conductor adds his/her meanings and features, emphasizing specific values in the work. The knowledge of the composer's biography also influences the interaction with the score:

<sup>4</sup> In Great Britain, women comprise 1.4% of all orchestral conductors (Scharff 2015 as cited in Bull 2016:857).

The musical notes come at the end. First, who wrote it, when, what he experienced. Why do I love Brahms? Because he had a very sad life! Really dramatic. Once you read about Brahms and then start listening to his piece, it seems completely different, right?... Tchaikovsky, his “vomit” of expression. Because he was gay, right? He had no other way of saying that at the time. He spoke through music, but it was so exaggerated that it is sometimes strange to us today... So you always have to take into consideration who it was, what he was doing, what was happening in his life at that moment because it was at that moment that he wrote this piece. [female conducting professor]

As Jerzy Waldorff (1994:35) put it in his book, the composer creates a sculpture. It is up to the conductor to present it, illuminate it, and show it in a specific context. Thanks to this, depending on the conductor’s interpretation, a work by one composer may be performed better or worse and show its various aspects.

## Orchestra

A crucial aspect of the conductor’s role-making is cooperation with the orchestra—a complex organization of highly trained musicians (Khodyakov 2014:65)—transforming his/her bodily expressions into actual sounds. In the conversational interviews I conducted during the observations, the musicians repeatedly recalled shocking stories when the orchestra, mistreated by the conductor during rehearsals, remained silent during the concert despite the conductor’s sign to start. In such a situation, the conductor is unable to influence the orchestra. In most cases, however, orchestral musicians collaborate with the conductor, and even if he/she makes a mistake, the orchestra will play as agreed during the rehearsal. One of the interviewees, an opera

conductor, told me that he once forgot to bring his musical score prepared for the concert. He stood there in front of the orchestra and was paralyzed by the lack of notes and comments. One musician, who played in a later part of the concert, ran to the conductor’s room and brought it. During this time, the conductor conducted without notes, using only his memory, but the orchestra supported him and played as established during rehearsals.

Charisma and the ability to influence musicians who perform in the orchestra play a unique role in this relationship. During the conducting classes I observed, teachers made multiple comments on how to work with an orchestra represented by one or two pianists during the classes. During one of the lessons I witnessed, a student showed a grimace of dissatisfaction when the accompanists played differently than he would have liked. He was immediately reprimanded by the professor.

Professors would often react if a student made an unclear gesture, and they frequently explained the pianists’ mistakes by the student’s lack of precision and decisiveness. This element of the conductor’s role is, therefore, an essential part of the didactic process. Each conductor, however, uses his/her unique ways of managing the orchestra, which is also dependent on the particular characteristics of its members.

A conductor, as a mediator between the composer’s notation and the orchestra, solves the problems that result from the practical performance of the piece by the orchestral ‘apparatus.’ As Jerzy Maksymiuk, a world-famous Polish conductor, put it, a conductor should know the possibilities of each instrument. Composers are creators of somewhat abstract musical scores unless they are also conductors. It is the

conductor who puts their concept of a sound into actual music action. Working with instrumentalists shows that, for example, the flute is inaudible because the composer did not take into account that another group of instruments is louder (Maksymiuk and Piasecka 2002:96).

A vital element of the conductor's social role is the ability to react quickly to errors, uncertainty, or hesitation in the orchestra (Faulkner and Becker 2009). As a leader, the conductor is responsible for the performance of the work, including various slips of the orchestra. As all the interviewees stated, no hesitation or uncertainty should be seen in his/her movements. The conductor energizes and inspires the orchestra, and the main instrument of the conductor's work is the body.

In the profession of the conductor (not only an orchestral one), indecision is interpreted as evidence of a lack of professionalism, a lack of charisma, and an inability to control one's body. Conductors manipulate impressions through their bodies, and, as leaders, they constantly control their facial expressions, that is, reactions to any errors that may appear. Any, even small and short, facial expression that shows dissatisfaction or disappointment is a sign for the orchestra that the conductor is not happy with their work. In such a moment, the orchestra may be put off its stride and can cast a shadow on subsequent stages of the concert. As one of the interviewees, a female conducting professor, stated, decisions about the means of interpretation are:

Seemingly democratic. Because these appearances give me more opportunities, right? I have more of these ideas to solve the problem and give the team a sense of freedom. Freedom. The right to decide, right? This is what I think is very important. I am not

a supporter of dictatorial rule over the team. I just don't know if it can give anyone satisfaction. It means the burden of responsibility for the decision made, and so it always falls on me. [female conducting professor]

The conductor-orchestra relationship has changed considerably since World War II, along with cultural changes.<sup>5</sup> Before WWII, the role of a conductor had much more to do with dictatorship or even tyranny (see also: Khodyakov 2014:77). It was caused by the socio-economic conditions that prevailed before WWII and the death of many professional musicians during the war. In the 1950s and 1960s, a large number of musicians were amateurs who had received little or no professional education. Things changed slowly up to the 1990s when a new interpretation of leadership became dominant. As the number of professional, highly educated musicians increased, new, more partner-like relationships between a conductor and an orchestra developed. The musicians knew the 'obvious things' and could interact with the conductor like partners. A male conducting professor describes the process very well:

You have to be very resolute. Firm. Today, mainly professional. With knowledge and skills, you must immediately impress the orchestra to get them to back you. Until recently, where it was only a male profession, until the 1990s...this model of conducting an orchestra has completely changed. It was, all over the world... they were gods. Ruthless, tough. A bossy sergeant, humiliating people, and so on. That was it. Until the nineties...I was already a bit differently shaped. I had a different idea, which worked well for me...that I would achieve more, of course, always very consis-

<sup>5</sup> More about the historical context of the social role of a conductor may be found in a chapter by Denis Stevens, "Why Conductors? Their Role and the Idea of Fidelity" (1986).

tently. Polite, but very consistently...Same methods, but in a different way [laughs]. Dressed in a different form.

Generally, obeying the conductor is an institutionalized rule that dates back to the Baroque period. Highly educated musicians learn for years how to observe the conductor's baton and interpret his or her gestures and facial expression (Khodyakov 2014:66). Their secondary socialization of the musician's role includes obeying the conductor's orders, which enables him or her to perform their role. As Dmitry Khodyakov (2014:67) puts it, the conductor's authority is based on tradition, charisma, and the legal rules of the orchestra.

### Soloists

Conductors may work with two types of **soloists**—instrumentalists and vocalists. Both may appear in a philharmonic and an opera. In a philharmonic, the soloists usually stand on the stage with the orchestra and are visible to the conductor. In operas, instrumental soloists may either be present on the stage or sit in the pit with the orchestra while singers play their parts on the stage. In such an arrangement, communication with the conductor may be more challenging. In all of these situations, the conductor's regular role, that is, that of a leader, is passed on to the soloist. The conductor's main task is to make the soloist feel safe and to conduct the orchestra in a way that their music makes a comfortable background. During one of the conducting lessons, I observed a female conducting student working with a female violin soloist. The student's job was to conduct two piano players in accordance with the performance of the soloist. Assessing their first presentation, the professor said to the conducting student: "You cannot conduct a soloist. Look at

the bow and breathe to have equal impulses with her." When a conductor works with a real orchestra, impulses are transmitted by the conductor to the orchestra. That is how a common musical reality is created through the conductor's body, namely, his/her breath.

The way the music is played may be negotiated during the rehearsals—an example of how social interactions shape the role-making depending on the needs and requirements of the interactional partner (Turner 2002:23). The negotiations may take the form of verbalizing the perspective of the soloist, who has their vision of the piece. However, the conductor's job is to make the whole piece of music sound coherent; therefore, if the soloist's concept is not good enough or does not suit the musicality of the particular orchestra, the conductor should attempt to find a common notion so that the final effect is satisfactory for all parties. Sometimes, especially when the conductor and the soloist know each other very well and have somewhat of a partner-like relationship, these negotiations may be very straightforward. During one of my observations of opera rehearsals for a New Year concert, one of the male vocal soloists kept singing a romantic piece at a very slow pace. The issue had already been discussed with the conductor. When the orchestra performed the piece on the third day of rehearsals, and the soloist sang it slowly again, the conductor shouted to him from the orchestral channel: "Oh John [name changed—DBO], come on! You don't want to sound like some old lout!"

However, negotiations may also take place during a concert. The soloist may perform differently than agreed during the rehearsals, in which case the conductor usually has no other choice but to conform to the soloist's expectations, bearing in mind the suc-

cess of the concert (Faulkner and Becker 2009:185). Despite the distance and ongoing performance, the interactions between the conductor and the soloist take place even in such challenging contexts. As the following example indicates, role-making occurs at all times and is sometimes limited to nonverbal communication between the actors. As conductors explain, eye contact is essential. The soloist learns to see it and look at the conductor in a way imperceptible to the audience.

This situation may be challenging for the conductor's leadership, as it undermines his/her decisions and forces him/her to perform under the soloist's dominance during the concert. Therefore, actions are taken to fix the conductor's status. The following example indicates that a conductor should constantly interpret the actions of others and decide whether they interfere with his/her interpretation of the social role:

Well, you can give up your vision, but it's never convenient because it is also like...It is just such a thin line between what you can impose and what you can give away without losing face, right? Well, because if every singer did what he wants with you, then, at some point, the orchestra will also say, "Okay, [we don't care]." Or you have some authority, and you can force it...Then you have to intervene somehow; you just have to. [female opera orchestra conductor]

## Ballet

When it comes to cooperating with the ballet, which is often a task of opera conductors, an additional issue needs to be considered, namely, the human body as an entity that works within certain limitations. Of course, the limits of the human body are visible in the case of instrumentalists (e.g., an over-

ly fast pace makes it impossible for them to play) and in the case of vocal soloists (e.g., the issue of breathing, the ability to hold a note), and they may also interfere with the conductor's vision. However, in the case of ballet dancers, the conductors who work with them state they should be familiar with how dancers work, perhaps by participating in ballet rehearsals, and adjust the pace of the music to the bodily abilities of the group or the ballet soloists. With instrumental and vocal soloists, two-way communication with the conductor is possible. They may show the conductor that something is wrong or that they need to go slower or faster. In contrast, ballet dancers constantly move on the stage and have infrequent eye contact with the conductor. During a performance, dancers adjust their bodywork to the music played by the orchestra. As a male opera orchestra conductor puts it: "Here a smile [on the dancer's face], a heavenly atmosphere, but then they leave the stage and say, 'What was that?!'"

When preparing a concert, the ballet director works alongside the conductor and indicates the parts in which the dancers may have problems with the pace, jumping, or other elements of the performance. Sometimes, the changes are included in the final version of the concert, regardless of the conductor's vision of the piece.

The conductor's interpretation of the musical score, expressed, among others, by adopting a particular pace, needs to be negotiated with the performers. Otherwise, the concert may not be well-played, or a conflict between the conductor and the ballet dancers will arise. The negotiation takes place not only during the rehearsals. When leading the orchestra during the concert, the conductor constantly observes and harmonizes the pace of the music between the ballet and the orchestra (see also: Faulk-

ner and Becker 2009:185). That is a challenging task. A female opera conductor describes some of the problems that may arise:

If you're at too slow a pace, he [a ballet dancer] won't jump out because there is no run-up, right? The uphill run is too slow for him to do a pirouette, well...I was conducting, this year I had my first ballet debut, so let me tell you, I was so sweaty. Jesus! I thought I would die [laughs]. To harmonize the music and the body, the possibilities of the body. There are also soloists there; there are group performers. Each of the soloists is different, right?

## **Audience**

The relationship with the audience is mainly based on whether they will or will not approve of the conductor. It depends on many factors and is more relevant to philharmonic halls or operas with a long tradition. The audience is more used to a particular repertoire, performance style, or conductors' behavior. For example, conservative audiences, used to hearing the classics, are reluctant to accept conductors who prefer more contemporary pieces. In such situations, some conductors, even eminent ones, decide to include music known to their audience in their repertoire, even if it is not entirely in line with their taste (Waldorff 1994:50).

The conductor's relationship with the audience, mainly with regular patrons of a particular musical institution or with the audience present in the concert hall at a certain moment, may vary from welcoming to terrorist. Herbert von Karajan, the world-famous Austrian conductor, would stop conducting after a few beats if he thought that the audience did not treat the stage with due respect, for example, if someone coughed or shuffled their legs. He

would turn around and frown with an intent stare. The audience was afraid of him (Waldorff 1994:292).

As the conductor plays no musical instrument, some less informed members of the audience may doubt his/her role on the stage. Thus, some conductors feel the need to legitimize their presence through more expressive conducting gestures (Khodyakov 2014:66, 68). The impression management applied in such situations is a way of communicating with the orchestra. Some conductors, knowing that a passage in a certain part of a piece is difficult and that the orchestra may make an error, might turn and look at the audience, sometimes blink, but generally show how they should understand the piece. As one of my interviewees said, "half of the audience is deaf, but they all have eyes."

An essential condition of the relationship between the conductor and the audience is that he/she usually stands in front of the orchestra with his/her back turned to the audience. That constitutes a context in which the audience cannot see the conductor's face (Khodyakov 2014:80). Therefore, the conductor does not feel observed by the audience and can focus on making music. Many of the conductors I interviewed declared that was one of the pros of their profession. Standing with their back to the audience and facing the orchestra creates a context of focusing on the common creation of the sound, not the perception of the audience (although some conductors also try to manage meanings transmitted directly to the orchestra). Not being observed by musical amateurs, only by professionals, creates a more comfortable atmosphere for work and expression.

The interaction between the conductor and the audience rarely is direct. It takes place only when the conductor enters or leaves the stage or makes

an announcement. Therefore, the rapport between the conductor and the audience is built by experiencing the concert's shared and common reality. The feeling of a shared music reality is something conductors crave. However, the listeners' ability to follow the flux of music involves their awareness and knowledge that all musical elements constitute "a meaningful unity" (Schütz 1996:275; see also: Skanda 1982). That is how a male opera orchestra conductor describes the feeling:

I think that the coolest and most uplifting moment, when you can forget about all those different problems, is the moment when you feel it, and feel it very clearly, when the audience behind, behind the conductor's back, begins to breathe in a specific way and feel this unique energy. You can really feel that people like it. And it gives you huge wings.

### Personal Characteristics Influencing Conductor's Role-Making

The conductor's role is negotiated during various rehearsals, including those with an orchestra, but also with soloists or, in the case of opera conductors, with the choir and ballet. While interacting with musicians, dancers, and soloists, the conductor shapes his/her actions towards them and how he/she performs this social role. The most important factors that influence the role-making of an individual as a conductor are:

- **Gender:** The dominance of men in the profession originates from tradition. The definition of this social role was shaped when women were socialized to perform social roles characterized by submissiveness and a lack of decision-making skills, assertiveness, or leadership. Although the times and gender roles

have changed since the 18th century when the conducting profession appeared, women as conductors are assessed by the audience, musicians, and colleagues according to slightly different criteria. It is assumed that a male conductor is better suited to more 'serious' projects and strenuous undertakings. When it comes to the role-making of female conductors, the debate over the dress code is an interesting issue. According to some female conductors, their clothing should resemble men's outfits as much as possible. According to others, quite the opposite is true—the dress or gown should be feminine, elegant, and sexy. That is an intriguing example of the processual role-making aspects of female conducting as either imitating the social role of a male conductor or looking for ways to distinguish female conductors from men.

- **Age:** In the process of role-making, age has an impact on the chosen kind of relations with others—more dominating or more partner-like. Conductors who started their careers in the 1990s still had the chance to be educated and professionally shaped by professors who had been socialized in a hierarchic culture of orchestral and opera music and passed this image of the conductor's role to their disciples. However, through various other interactions, such as participating in international projects or working with younger orchestral musicians, students get acquainted with and have a chance to develop a less hierarchical pattern of relationships between the conductor and the orchestra.
- **Nationality and international experience:** If a conductor develops an international career,

he/she usually internalizes different, culturally shaped ways of communicating with the orchestra: he/she is more or less direct, offers more or less explanation, and decides to show emotions or communicate calmly. The more international professional experiences a conductor acquires, the more strategies he/she develops when interacting with other social actors. During international cooperation, a conductor also learns the universal language of gestures that musicians with different cultural backgrounds can interpret.

- Competencies: The conductor's experience, including international settings, greatly influences how orchestral musicians, soloists, audiences, and other social actors treat him/her. As already mentioned, it is challenging to maintain a balance between the conductor's vision and the influence of the people he/she cooperates with. An effective strategy to achieve such a balance is to build a rapport with others based on competencies such as theoretical knowledge, bodily skills, past projects, and charisma. That may be done by, for example, negotiating, sincerely or just pretending, the interpretation of the musical score (Khodyakov 2014:77). The ability to create trust between the conductor and his/her collaborators is vital for making music together. As Charles Hazlewood (2020<sup>6</sup>), a British conductor, declared, "My job depends upon it. There has to be between me and the orchestra an unshakable bond of trust, born out of mutual respect, through which we can spin a musical narrative that we all believe in." If the trust and rap-

port are lacking, the conductor cannot put his/her other competencies, however outstanding, into (orchestral) action. The competencies are also a kind of proof that a conductor knows what he/she is doing. A conductor may break even the most basic rules of the profession (e.g., remaining silent during the concert) if he/she is an established individual and if the behavior is consistent with the conventions and character of the musical piece (see also: Faulkner and Becker 2009:122). A great example is Leif Segerstam singing and shouting during a concert of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* op. 35 played by the Sinfónica de Galicia.<sup>7</sup>

- Type of professional contract: The form of employment influences the attributes of power the conductor has. If the conductor is also a director of music of the institution, his/her power over the musicians is greater, and she/he may, for example, refuse to prolong a musician's contact or not include them in future projects. Her/his power is based on charisma, but also the ability to influence the musician's career. Assistant conductors do not have that attribute of power, but they may have a long relationship with the orchestra; therefore, they may use charisma to build trust with the musicians. Guest conductors who play with the orchestra have the fewest attributes, as they work with the musicians for a short period and have no formal power over them. It is mainly through their ability to establish a trustful relationship with the orchestra and their charisma that they exercise their power (Khodyakov 2014:65).

<sup>6</sup> See: *Trusting the Ensemble*. Online lecture. Retrieved September 20, 2020 ([www.ted.com/talks/charles\\_hazlewood\\_trusting\\_the\\_ensemble](http://www.ted.com/talks/charles_hazlewood_trusting_the_ensemble)).

<sup>7</sup> See: Segerstam Leif conducting Sinfónica de Galicia in Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade* op.35. Retrieved June 10, 2021 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY4w4\\_W30aQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY4w4_W30aQ)).

## Concluding Remarks

The article debunks the myth about the individual, undisturbed, and autonomous work of an orchestral conductor. The making of this social role is shaped, negotiated, and created through social interactions with individuals and groups and with an object—the musical score. At the same time, the image of a resolute and determined conductor is sustained due to the expectations of other social actors engaged in the process of performing music. Additionally, the research reveals that the conductor's social role-making is influenced by cultural, group-related, and interactional factors. These factors shape individual careers and hence, the development of orchestral music. This role-making process relies on an ongoing balancing between the individual (the artistic) and the social (the persuasive, the organizational). Additionally, it depends on the negotiation of meanings with other social actors constantly taking on the view of the other and reconstructing the self in such social situations as interpreting a piece of music, presenting the interpretation to the orchestra, reacting to errors during rehearsals, and constructing leadership (Turner 2002:23).

Adopting Schütz's phenomenological concept enabled me to analyze the mediating process between the late composer and the orchestra to recreate a piece of music. The conductor's interactions with the late composer, his/her biography, the history of their times, and the possible intentions and emotions behind creating a musical score are based on socially derived and approved knowledge acquired during the educational process. Since the musical score is a set of guidelines that need to be followed to recreate a piece of music, they lack interpretation. The ways of interpreting each musical piece are part of the socialization in the musical professions and are based

on a common understanding of a piece, along with contemporary trends of interpretation. Additionally, the conductor's task is to recreate the piece of music taking into account the skills of particular musicians, the place of a concert, knowledge and ability to understand the meanings of the music by the audience. The audience's role is important as well since the conductor's task is to recreate the musical piece in a way that would be understood by contemporary listeners. What all of the described interactions have in common is that they are all created with a partner with imagined features—the late composer, the musical score and its meaning, and the audience. The conductor is taught and socialized to interact with them in a way that is expected from his/her social role.

Howard Becker's interactionist perspective was practical in analyzing the processes of communicating, negotiating, managing conflicts, and establishing a shared definition of the situation among all social actors engaged in the situation of a rehearsal or concert. Constant communication, verbal during rehearsals and non-verbal at the show, requires a shared set of meanings and gestures a conductor uses to transmit his/her idea of sound to other musicians. What is more, he/she considers the abilities of other performers, mainly the ballet and soloists, to produce a thriving musical entity. These rather democratic traits of relationships between the conductor and other participants of the situation are accompanied by more—in the case of conductors with a more traditional and patriarchal definition of their role—or less—in the case of conductors with a more modern definition—direct statements of their superior position and leadership. The role-making also depends on the wider, for example, economic or historical<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The mentioned change in the definition of the conductor's role after WWII.

context of the conductor's work or the personal characteristics. Numerous mentioned features, such as age, gender, nationality, or international experience, influence the perception of a conductor. However, if an individual chooses charismatic and leadership strategies of interactions, the personal features fall into the background of a particular situation.

Relationships with a variety of actors, and their related worlds of shared experiences, are necessary to obtain the symbolic and material resources required to establish communication networks both

between the performers and with others (Becker 1951; Segre 2020). Negotiating the role and the task of conducting indicates that "meaning arises contextually" through the performance and interpreting the reactions to the significant gestures used when playing a common piece of music (Faulkner and Becker 2009:154-155). The interactional aspect of the conductor's social role is crucial. It is the only musical profession that does not make any sound. It is others who make sounds for the conductor. Yet, it is the conductor him/herself who takes responsibility for every sound played during the performance.

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